

The Politics of French in Canada: Reminiscence of Past European History with a New Twist

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Abstract

Languages in Canada, especially French, continue to reflect the history and power domination of its European origins. French is one of the Official languages of Canada but is also a minority language for some of its communities outside of the province of Québec situated in Eastern Canada. It is protected by strong ideological and political influence and by law. In this presentation, I would like to reflect on how historical, cultural and social aspects of French are reproduced but also how transnational fluidity and multilingual practices are deconstructing or unbounding the idea of how French is seen in one Canadian province: Alberta. This Western Province has a strong conservative base and still has an issue with French being an Official language, a reminiscence from the past.

Drawing upon my work (Roy 2020). I take a sociolinguistic for change lens where historical and social understanding allow for critical view of ideologies and social changes. I also examine and investigate social processes (e.g., social categorization, marginalization, etc.) and how ideologies can impact as well as impede processes of social identity construction and language teaching and learning. In addition, I am using Pennycook and Makoni's (2020) idea that as researchers we will self-reflect and be open to adopt a dialectic and multiple perspectives on the data collected. My data comes from longitudinal and sociolinguistic ethnographic studies in Alberta over a period of 15 years and more. I interviewed participants (students, parents,

administrators, teachers) in schools, especially French immersion schools, and outside schools in order to find discourses related to French, where those discourses come from and what the long-term effects are of those discourses especially for those learning French. I also use some of my new data collected (Byrd Clark 2021) with multilingual students learning French. By looking at new discourses from youth multilingual learning French and using their repertoires every day, I can demonstrate how the 'old' can be unbounded by youths' everyday practices.

Keywords: *Canada, French, Discourse, linguistic anthropology, language education*

Introduction

Canada has ten provinces and three territories, as well as two official languages (English and French), an Indigenous population with several different languages, and a myriad of ethnolinguistic groups that create additional linguistic diversity. Languages in Canada, particularly French, continue to reflect the history and power domination of its European origins. French as one of the official languages of Canada, is also a minority language for some of its communities outside of the province of Québec in Eastern Canada. French and English are protected by strong ideological and political influence, and by law.

In this paper, I look at how historical, cultural, and social aspects of French are reproduced, but also the ways in which transnational fluidity and multilingual practices are deconstructing (or unbounding) the idea of how French is seen in one Canadian province: Alberta. This Western Province has a strong conservative base and, for a long time, has had an issue with French; a reminder of the past (Hayday 2005). As such, I will locate my work on the dynamics of the transnational multilingual practices in the tensions between the conservative sector and the French community.

Methodical Framework

Drawing on the work of (Roy, 2020), I draw on a framework of sociolinguistics action theory, that is, sociolinguistic for change. Within this framework, historical and social understandings mediate a critical view of ideologies and social change. I also examine and investigate social processes (e.g., social categorization and marginalization), and the ways in which ideologies can impact as well as impede processes of social identity construction, and language pedagogies. Observing the prevalent social and political discourses that currently prevail in Alberta, I seek to question the beliefs and assumptions of teachers in schools, to begin to gather

data so as to deconstruct historical and social ideologies. These ideologies constitute beliefs about languages as they are used in their social worlds. Kroskirty (2021) encourages us to look at language ideologies as a multiplicity, and views language ideological assemblages as a much-needed resource to reach beyond the mere identification of specific ideologies (such as standardization and linguistic purism) in order to produce a wider frame in which to explore and better understand complex communicative events, language contact and change, and such processes as language shift, multilingual adaptations, language ideological change, and forms of language revitalization.

(Kroskirty 2021, p. 136)

In addition to documenting the ideologies of the participants and the larger sample, I align with Pennycook and Makoni's (2020) notion that, as a researcher, I must self-reflect and be open to adopt dialectic and multiple perspectives on the data collected. For this, I position myself as a francophone or French Canadian who has left Québec, known as the French-speaking province in Canada. I moved to Alberta 21 years ago, and have retained a strong connection with French in a dominated English and conservative province, where French was not recognized in the past (Hayday 2005).

Most of my data emanates from longitudinal and sociolinguistic ethnographic studies in Alberta. For this, I interviewed participants (students, parents, administrators, and teachers) in schools, particularly in French immersion schools (content-based programs to learn French in Canada), and outside schools. I observe discourses connected to French, their origin, and their ong-term effects, particularly for students of French. I also draw data from my interaction with multilingual students of French, with a focus on the ways in which they appropriate French as a way to participate in the world (Roy and Byrd Clark 2021).

Participants' discourses and discussions

In the following section, I begin to present some of the comments on French language and society by the participants, following which, I will discuss these comments by eliciting suggestions of marginalization and/or future goals, thus including a grounded theory approach.

The first of the three respondednts, Roxane, is a future teacher of French. She learned French as a young girl, but still interacts with many people question her origins, or who may switch to English when speaking with her.

Speaker	Content
Roxanne	It is hard to crossover (she means here to be included in the francophone community as a learner of French). Most people in Alberta will not get enough practice to reach that level, and French culture has a bit of a stereotype and reputation of not being welcoming to non-native speakers. To a certain extent, that is a stereotype, and I do not always encounter that, but there is some degree of truth to that. I do think that other linguistic communities are easier to integrate into. I do consider myself bilingual. I know I do have to fight other people's opinions in order to consider myself this way. (...) I do not think it is a matter of individual people, it is a matter of language culture and language attitudes that go back hundreds of years. Now that I have the historical background, I now know where it comes from and makes it less inclined to take it personally, but more inclined to expect it. Things that have been part of my culture for 100-200 years are pretty ingrained in me (interview 2018)

French is at times frames as a language that must maintain its standardized purity, and as such. Joining the French community is somewhat arduous for outsiders, new learners, and for those wanting to teach French in Alberta. For example, Roxane (above) struggles daily to be considered as a legitimate French teacher in her province. Ideologies of native speakers, in addition to not being able to be seen as part of the community, have marginalized her as a potential teacher in that community, having invited several consequences. She has found herself struggling continuously as an educator of French, a struggle that brings other French teachers to ultimately leave the profession.

As such, in 2022, there is currently a retention problem with French teachers in Canada. A survey in 2016 presented the fact that, eight in every ten Canadians agree that both languages should be taught in all elementary schools across Canada, and to increase the bilingualism of young students, where governments should also work towards the inclusion of students in immersion programs (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages 2019). I argue that the inclusion of non-native teachers of French, together with their diverse varieties, will allow for a diversity, and will also assist the region to retain its teaching population, while offering the teachers opportunities to speak and practice the language.

Michel (below) is a student who outperformed all other students in his year, in his public school. His father is of African descent and birth, and his mother is Canadian. Michel was born in Alberta and started French immersion in kindergarten. Further to this, he exhibited a strong passion for the language, such as listening to Radio Canada (Canadian Public Radio Broadcasting) daily.

Speaker	Content
Interviewer	How do you see yourself in the Francophonie in Canada?
Michel	I am not good at all compared to, compared to a francophone but I could go to Québec and speak French. I could do in Québec, and I wouldn't be eliminated in French. There will be times anyway where I wouldn't know what to say when I want to speak but that's ok.

I met Michel many years ago, and since then, and until the present time, he has reiterated his comments on exclusion from 'la francophonie.' Despite his attempts to speak French and to attain inclusion, he believes that he will continue to be excluded and 'eliminated,' owing to his variety of French. However, in 2022, the situation began to change. Youth in French programs (French immersion, French as a second language) have begun to become aware of the benefits of having competence in several languages.

In 2022, I interviewed students who learned three languages in their private schools (English, French, Spanish). These students are privileged as students in a school where they can practice their language skills through travel. However, discourse on languages is changing with youth. One student, Ed, speaks Spanish at home, and learns English and French at school. He was born in Venezuela and considers himself a Canadian Venezuelan. When attempting to speak English in class, the other members immediately stop him, and request that he speaks French.

Speaker	Content
Ed	They force us to speak French. I remember I was speaking English and ... they said: "You should speak French more. Don't speak English anymore". I think that will help me more improving my French speaking today because when you're young, you put in language more. (...): I am not good at all compared to, compared to a francophone but I could go to Québec and speak French. I could do in Québec, and I wouldn't be eliminated in French. There will be times anyway where I wouldn't know what to say when I want to speak but that's ok.
Interviewer	Sylvie: do you think it is important to speak several languages?
Ed	I will say yes because you will find yourself in different cultures, you will find yourself talking to new people that you were not find ... So learning are different ideas from all the place for example

Discourses of using only one language in school persist even as translinguaging is becoming more and more valuable for multilingual students (García and Li 2013). However, multilingual youth are increasingly using their linguistic repertoires, and are changing our view of French.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated that French is still seen as a language that needs to be spoken in a specific way in order for learners of French to be included or accepted in French communities. Multilingual youth are however beginning to change that, by using their linguistic repertoires and by identifying differently, by having multiple views, and by having different origins. As one teacher has suggested:

Speaker	Content
Teacher	A lot of these children, in Late and early immersion, are children from immigrants, the second generation, the first Canadian generation and, with this life, a second language, a third language, a fourth language ... they are more ... They want to learn more languages. They are more willing to develop their knowledge; they are more tolerant of other languages and other cultures, and they are here in Canada.

At times, francophone individuals such as myself desire to preserve French and its heritage, as well as the French worldviews. However, such a preservation requires the inclusion of the 'other,' those who are learning French with their own varieties that will increase the diverse range of worldviews of the Francophone community, in regions where also English dominates. The past may still be present in current discourses, but ideologies shift with time and new generations.

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