

# The linguistic portrait is in need of updating

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE    OCTOBER 24, 2012



Quebecers are increasingly polarized over language, but the reality, researchers say, is that the province's youth are interacting in a bevy of languages at work and in the social sphere.

**Photograph by:** Allen McInnis, THE GAZETTE

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MONTREAL - Is French thriving in Quebec?

Or is the world's 13th most widely spoken language on the endangered list in la belle province?

In a city where clerks greet you with a friendly, "Bonjour Hi" and where snippets of French, English, Arabic, Spanish and other tongues waft through the crowd on Ste. Catherine St., some people see Montreal's linguistic diversity as its greatest asset, the key ingredient in its legendary je ne sais quoi.

Others view Montreal as a linguistic battleground where French is barely holding its own against an influx of newcomers and the irresistible pull of English.

Quebecers are increasingly polarized over language — a debate that could ratchet up a few notches Wednesday, when Statistics Canada unveils language results from the 2011 census.

The federal agency will release statistics showing how French, English and other languages have fared across Canada over the five years since the last census. In Quebec, all eyes will be on Montreal, where mother-tongue francophones slipped to just under 50 per cent of the island's population in the 2006 census.

Just over 54 per cent of residents of the island of Montreal spoke French most often at home in 2006, while 25.2 per cent spoke English and 20.6 per cent spoke another language.

In the greater Montreal region, 69.1 per cent of the 3.3 million residents spoke French most often at home, 17.4 per cent spoke English and 13.4 per cent spoke another language in 2006.

Coming on the heels of a bruising election campaign where Premier Pauline Marois emphasized the need for tougher laws to protect French, the newest census stats will no doubt be spun by politicians, media and experts within minutes of their release Wednesday morning. Cue the teleprompter to words like “anglicisation,” “inquiétant” and “déclin du français.”

But many language experts say it would be a mistake to interpret Montreal’s increasingly cosmopolitan population as a sign that French is under siege.

In fact, traditional categories like francophone, anglophone and allophone are breaking down in a city where many people live, study, work and play in two or more languages, says France Martineau, a professor at the University of Ottawa and international expert on French who holds the research chair in langue, identité et migration en Amérique française (language, identity and migration in French America.)

“You can’t say there are two solitudes in Montreal: It simply isn’t the case,” Martineau said, referring to the city’s longtime French-English dichotomy. “You don’t have two solitudes; you have a multicultural group with a vast number of interconnections, with different networks in which people circulate.”

Patricia Lamarre, a professor at the Université de Montréal who specializes in language dynamics, said the daily lives of young, multilingual Montrealers illustrate why rigid categories like allophone or francophone no longer accurately capture the linguistic realities on the ground.

“They go to the passport office, do it all in French, turn around and go out with some of their friends that are trilingual like them and they’ll speak in the three languages, and they’ll turn around and hang out with some friends at a bar on St. Laurent and use French and English, and then they’ll talk to somebody over the phone and just use English,” Lamarre said.

Nonetheless, there is a widespread public perception, fuelled by media reports and anecdotal evidence, that French is losing ground to English in the downtown core.

Fifty-five per cent of French-speaking Quebecers think the government should reinforce Bill 101, according to a poll last month by Léger Marketing. A 2009 poll by Léger for the Association for Canadian Studies and the Quebec Community Groups Network found 90 per cent of Quebec francophones think French is under threat in Montreal.

The government is right to be concerned about protecting French, said Amina Meknassi, 35, while chatting with her hairdresser in French and Arabic, switching effortlessly between the two languages.

“As soon as you get on the job market, you find out that English is required,” said the Notre-Dame-de-

Grâce resident.

“More and more, you hear English in the stores. In the métro, I hear English,” Mekkassi added.

The perception that French is threatened could be contributing to heightened language tension, with an apparent rise in incidents of people being berated for speaking English, and the recent case of a ticket booth in Villa Maria métro bearing a sign reminding commuters that French is Quebec’s official language.

Marois’s Parti Québécois government has proposed to toughen Quebec’s language charter by, among other things, extending francization requirements to small businesses and barring non-anglophones from attending English CEGEPs.

Last week, Marois said she is worried that francophones in Montreal face assimilation.

In an interview with Quebec City newspaper Le Soleil before departing for a summit of francophone countries in Kinshasa, Marois said she has always found it troubling that France and other French-speaking countries “allow themselves to be seduced” by English.

But she said she is far more concerned about the state of French in Quebec.

In a 2010 report, former PQ culture critic Pierre Curzi charged that French has undergone a “spectacular regression” in Montreal. Curzi quit the party last year and did not stand for re-election.

“In the metropolitan region, French is still in the majority for now, but the progress of English is such that it will take over as the daily language within 20 years,” he predicted in an interview from his home in Mont-St-Hilaire.

But many experts say such doomsday scenarios are unrealistic.

“There are two problems in the way they draw on the demographic data to create this feeling that French is fragile and portray French speakers as in a menaced position,” Lamarre said.

The first is focusing on the island rather than the greater Montreal area, she said. That distorts the linguistic picture because the anglophone population is concentrated on the West Island and in the west end.

“That’s a major problem because a good many francophones have moved off the island to the middle-class suburbs that surround the island, like Laval, Repentigny and so on that aren’t considered in the data when they say ‘Montréal s’anglicise,’ ” Lamarre said.

The second problem is that statistics based on the language spoken at home or on mother tongue don’t reflect the large number of Montrealers for whom French is not the primary language at home but who use French in most of their interactions outside the home, Lamarre said.

“There are a whole lot of people that are using French in their daily lives but what we’re focusing on instead is language of the home. And that means that all the data on how many people are using

French at school, at work, with friends, with the government, in public interaction, that kind of data isn't there," she said.

More than half of Montrealers (and 70 per cent of anglophones) were bilingual in 2006, while 18 per cent were trilingual.

"It's a huge success story," Lamarre said.

"If you look at the statistics, French-English bilingualism is on the rise for everybody, whether you're an immigrant, an anglophone or a francophone in Montreal. And I think maybe that's the new dynamic."

When Quebec adopted Bill 101 in 1977, the goal was to establish French as the primary language of work and public interactions, noted Daniel Weinstock, a law professor at McGill University.

Has that goal been achieved?

"I think that with the indicators that we were using 20 or 30 years ago," Weinstock said, "the answer would be, 'Yes, no problem.' The only way to argue that French is under threat is by changing the indicators and saying, 'Are they speaking French in the home?'"

By refocusing attention from language spoken in the public sphere to that spoken in the privacy of people's homes, proponents of tougher language laws have created the perception that French is under siege, he said.

"At what point do we enter into a kind of social engineering that is just kind of worrying in that we are trying to control what is happening in people's homes?" Weinstock asked.

As Montreal's population becomes increasingly diverse, it is becoming more and more difficult to pigeonhole people by language, he said.

Weinstock, raised as a francophone but equally comfortable in English, said linguistic barriers are a thing of the past for many Montreal teenagers, including his 17-year-old daughter.

"I listen to her and her friends chat and they're moving back between English and French without realizing what they're doing, and the kids who are from other backgrounds are folding in Arabic, Russian, Bulgarian.

"They live in a much more linguistically complex and linguistically plural and fluid world than the one that we did when we were growing up," he said.

"And so I worry that a lot of the picture that we're getting is based on using tools that are no longer appropriate to the reality that we're trying to measure."

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