



fronquêtes

ENQUÊTES SUR L'ÉDUCATION EN MILIEU MINORITAIRE FRANCOPHONE

Je... euh... Je... Linguistic Insecurity in Canada's Francophone Communities

by Yves Cormier

A child's first French babble – “Maman! Papa!” – are like music to the ears of parents who never tire of encouraging their son or daughter to learn new words. Children follow the linguistic model of those around them and are satisfied with it since it enables them to express their needs. Their entry in school introduces them to a new reality: there they learn “standard” French and often feel that the way they speak differs in terms of accent, vocabulary and grammatical structure. This is confusing and causes linguistic insecurity. *How can a language that served them so well for the first five years of their life be called into question this way? Have their parents misled them? How can everyone around them have been so badly mistaken?* Yves Cormier is deeply interested in this issue and provides a sobering view of linguistic insecurity in a feature article on the topic. Here is an overview.

KNOWING WHERE WE COME FROM

The language of a community is called into question only when it is compared to other languages. The French spoken in Canada is part of a large family of French languages spoken in the world, with its own unique characteristics. In fact, it can be said that the “malaise” regarding Canadian French only appeared after the 18th century defeats in both Acadia and New France, when the French-Canadian way of speaking was devalued in comparison to the French from France and downgraded in terms of social status by the English language, which had become the dominant language in North America.

More than half of our words come from France's regional dialects, and the other half, from old French which we miraculously maintained. This variety of French subsequently borrowed several Aboriginal words and, eventually, continued to evolve with additions from the English language. Over time, many influences have led to changes in pronunciation, grammar and lexicon.

Problems commonly arise when a Francophone from Canada compares his language to the French currently spoken in France. As linguist Jacques Leclerc points out, saying “s'enfarger” (a common phrase in Canada) instead of “s'empêtrer” (common in France) does not compromise clarity, logic or purity when we know that our audience will

understand the message (which with both terms is “to trip over”). It is often assumed that the French from France is somehow superior, but we need to move beyond this linguistic insecurity and be proud of the French spoken in Canada's Francophone communities. In fact, among the more recent words in Canadian French, it should be noted that several were created by the Office québécois de la langue française to replace anglicisms used in France. This appears to be a shift of roles that clearly demonstrates languages' constant evolution.

THE ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE AND THE OMNIPRESENCE OF ENGLISH

Most languages evolve over time through usage. French is an exception. The *Académie française*, known in English as the French Academy, is a 17th century institution that was first created as a unifying force, but gradually became an ennobling tool intended for the elite. Four centuries later, while other languages have evolved out of a need for efficient communications, Francophones remain tied to a linguistic ideal that often drives them away from their actual linguistic needs related to changing context.

In addition, French Canada faces another challenge: the daily contact with the English language. In his article, Yves Cormier specifies that the inclusion of anglicisms is proportional to the dominant language's degree of vitality in the environment. The article explains how initially economic, then political reasons have inevitably led to the inclusion in the French language of many words and expressions drawn from English.

Two factors therefore have a significant negative impact on how confident Francophones in Canada feel about expressing themselves in their mother tongue: on the one hand, the dominance of the English language that is associated with socio-economic prestige and, on the other hand, a French language that is devalued by its own linguistic community and based on a foreign standard.

MITIGATE THE FEELING OF LINGUISTIC INSECURITY

The more Francophones are in a minority context, the more linguistic insecurity is problematic. In fact, throughout

Canada, several Francophone minority communities have given up and assimilated into the dominant English community. Yves Cormier challenges readers to consider how we can prevent this insecurity from forever silencing the most vulnerable Francophone communities.

To conclude, the author suggests that the Francophone community adopt a “functional standard” that would recognize Canada’s many varieties of French while being based on the community’s own linguistic reality. Three factors would have to be taken into consideration in developing such a framework: the need to remain as close as possible to the general standard; the need to respect all linguistic forms used in the community; and the need to maintain some kind of systematic linguistic structure.

The author also refers to the Quebec experience in this field and suggests a policy to integrate Canadianisms in order to meet the needs of a modern French language. Various factors would have to guide the process for Francophone minority communities: frequency of use, extent of usage, history of use, words without French equivalents, derived words, words with a different meaning, and common words shared with other Francophone communities.

AND WHAT ABOUT SCHOOLS?

Schools are at the heart of the survival of the French language. Schools have a mandate to nurture communities’ linguistic vitality by preparing youth to give French a key place in their life.

In the full article, Yves Cormier insists it is essential for students to understand the complexity of the coexistence of languages in their surroundings, particularly when it comes to factors influencing French. Students must better understand how spoken French has evolved in their community in order to better grasp today’s social context.

Students must also appreciate the fact that languages can adopt an infinite variety of forms. Based on the Quebec or Acadian roots of the French language in Canada, students need to understand that French can vary from one village to another, even within the same linguistic community.

The issue of the French language being circumscribed by the rules of the *Académie française* needs to be discussed

in classrooms. Especially in Francophone minority communities, students have to feel that there is room for evolution of the language. Knowing, for instance, that the *Office québécois de la langue française* is the world leader when it comes to French modernization reinforces the idea that French can evolve to better reflect the communities it serves.

French-language school students also need to understand that it is possible, within one language, to express the same idea in different ways. When it comes to language, students have to learn about the various language registers and styles so they realize that, like any other language, French can be adapted to suit the circumstances: one will speak in a certain way with their friends, for example, but will use a different register in more formal situations.

Of course, we all want our graduating students to be able to clearly communicate with the rest of the Francophone world. In order to do so, the author of this article suggests a constructivist approach that would allow students to develop their linguistic abilities based on the French they already use and know, while ensuring that this variety is not denigrated in the process.

Cormier posits students need to consider the issue of linguistic dominance as a final aspect in order to properly analyze and, ideally, counter their linguistic insecurity. Simply knowing that a language under the dominance of another will face challenges helps students position themselves on this issue. This knowledge may help them feel slightly less linguistically insecure and at the same time help them better understand their linguistic rights.

CONCLUSION

It will never be possible for Francophones in Canada to entirely overcome the feeling of linguistic insecurity because there will always be dominant languages impacting on the various forms of French in Canada. As a matter of fact, nearly all Francophone communities in the world have a linguistic complex of some sort.

A better understanding of the factors influencing language is nevertheless a first step towards greater self-confidence in the ability to express oneself in French with freedom and pride.

Yves Cormier was born in Moncton, New Brunswick. His studies and various jobs have led him to live in Nova Scotia, Quebec, France and Mali. He holds a PhD in French Studies (1992) for which he produced the very first glossary of Acadian French, later published as the *Dictionnaire du français acadien*. He taught Languages and Literature at Sainte-Anne University, Pointe-de-l’Église, Nova Scotia (1993-98), and then at the University of Moncton (2005-08). Since 2008, he teaches at the Campbellton Campus of the Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick. He is also the author of: *Les aboiteaux en Acadie* (1991, France-Acadie Award); *L’Acadie d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (1994); *Grandir à Moncton* (1993, youth novel); *Dictionnaire du français acadien* (1999, republished in 2010); and *Sur les traces de Bartimée* (2010, his latest youth novel).

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