

## INTRODUCTION

The French language in Québec: here is an astonishing adventure, one that matches the scale of the American continent! If the French language established itself along the shores of the St. Lawrence River in 1608 and initially developed under the wing of France, which paths did it follow and in what condition was it passed down to us four hundred years later, having escaped British assimilation, American annexation and Anglo-Canadian domination? Why in the past four decades has it been concentrating its strengths within its historical territory of Québec? What did it mean to Québécois in the past, and what does it represent now in their eyes and in the eyes of others, at the dawn of the new millennium? More than eighty well-known specialists from a wide range of fields have contributed to creating this unprecedented panorama that draws an overall portrait of four hundred years of history and life in French in Québec.

### **Four periods...**

Since the status of a language (that is to say, its official place and actual situation in a society) is the essential factor for its survival, this is the basis on which we have described each of the four periods of this history, which roughly, though not exactly, correspond to the traditional historical or political chronological divisions: the French Regime; the British Regime; the period of Confederation; the Quiet Revolution and the contemporary period.

#### **French: A Royal Status (1608-1760)**

The French language accompanied France's discoveries and settlements in the New World. It planted French place names throughout the American continent. At the very heart of New France, it was exposed to the threat of English from the outset. After the attack by the Kirke brothers in 1629, Québec became English for three years. But after 1660, especially with the arrival of *les filles du roi*, the French language, supported and encouraged by Louis XIV, imposed itself in the St. Lawrence Valley. The majority of colonists came from towns or regions which were more

exposed to French than were others and, as the colony brought them together, the patois dialects they brought from the French provinces declined and the unification of French or the adoption of French as a shared language thus took place much more rapidly in Canada than it did in the mother country.

When they left France, the first Canadians sought to break free from the constraints of the old society. They quickly set themselves apart from the European French, who did not fail to notice, along with their vanity and self-importance, their endurance and their spirit of independence. These latter qualities would prove valuable to them in resisting the attacks that were to follow.

### **French: A Language without Status (1760-1850)**

The Conquest of 1760 sounded the death knell of French expansion. England defeated France, but would it win out over Canadians\*? Reality being what it is, how could English be imposed on a population that only understood French? Plans were devised to ostracize and Anglicize but at the same time the British were forced to delay and make allowances. There were numerous attempts at assimilation, but Canadians resisted by dint of petitions. Given the threat of a revolution, French civil laws were recognized, and then Lower Canada was granted a legislative assembly.

Canadians then entered the game of politics. They provided the French language with the recognition it lacked, and tried to escape the unending veto of the local British authorities. This was going too far! After the troubles of 1837, Lord Durham drew up his grand charter of assimilation, which led to the Union of the two Canadas and the banishment of the French language, which was finally to be re-established in 1848, thanks to the actions and demands of Canadians.

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\* This reflects the historical usage of “Canadian” (or the French term *Canadien*), which referred to the French-speaking population in this period.

The period was one of resistance, active defence, and struggles for the recognition of French. At the outset in the new British colony, the French language depended mainly on the population of rural areas and their clergy. It survived and developed in the face of adversity. However, it was soon to have a place in the courts and the political arena. Parliamentarians and community leaders rose to defend it. They frequently spoke both languages and, for the French language, asked only that it be given its place alongside English. At the same time, a new stratum of the Canadian bourgeoisie came into being: concerned above all with its privileges, it willingly yielded to Anglomania and contributed, through its attitude, to weakening the French language.

### **French: A Compromised Status (1850-1960)**

One hundred years after the Conquest, the British North America Act (Confederation) finally gave the French language a true legal and political status. At the same time, it gave French a powerful partner: English. This duality would work against it and reinforce the inequality between the two languages. The joy of union soon gave way to disillusion. A second defeat had been suffered, in a certain sense worse than the first! Given the increasing dominance of English, the French language weakened and was devalued: it put up a passive resistance, survived and struggled along but did not have the strength to liberate itself.

It was the prisoner of its negative and paralysing image. Everything - work, money, respect, even the ability to communicate - slipped from its grasp. It was a sad period for the French language: a compromised status instead of a promised partnership, declared inferiority instead of the proclaimed equality, “survival”<sup>\*</sup> instead of life.

And yet...! Turned in upon itself, the language was already regaining its strength and preparing its liberation. In the long-standing absence of discourse on and support for the language, its condition and the reality surrounding it were discussed in remarkable writings in the fields of literature and the social sciences. Québécois also came to sense the failure of the dream of a

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<sup>\*</sup> The term “survival” (*survivance* in French) well reflects the major concern of the period, but it applied above all to the situation of Canadians outside Québec and Franco-Americans. We use it here to describe the state of “sluggish existence” in which the French language found itself in Québec because of the dominance of English.

French Canada, and the urgency of making Québec the only resolutely French-speaking territory in North America.

### **The Reconquest of French (1960-2000)**

The hour of emancipation had sounded for the French language, which was taken charge of again. First, its condition was denounced then its status of equality in Canada was reconquered with the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Laurendau-Dunton) and the Federal Official Languages Act. It gained the upper hand in Québec with the Official Language Act (Law 22, 1974) and the Charter of the French Language (Law 101, 1977). Prepared through a long fermentation process, this linguistic reconquest, sustained by the Quiet Revolution, took place in the space of less than twenty years.

This period was also accompanied by a political, economic and cultural reconquest which revealed to all the fundamental role the French language played in Québec society. Writers, poets, novelists and essayists had already set the tone, powerfully expressing Québécois identity and, with it, the existence of a French-speaking Québec. Soon to be an official language, and supported by a vast movement of gallicization, French would gradually become “the normal and everyday language of work, schools, communications, commerce and business”. With the Charter of the French Language, French Canadians in Québec – who had recently become Québécois – now felt safe, and were increasingly aware of their status as a majority. Survival was now a thing of the past; life was asserted!

A new period now began, with a new kind of Québécois, less ethnocentric, more open, more inclusive, and prepared to share the name “Québécois” with all the citizens of Québec. In light of the new intercultural relations born of immigration, Québec society became more aware of its plurality. Discourse on language joined with cultural discourse in seeking to establish new bases that would be comfortable and constructive for everyone. Many people were already “thinking of Québec as a nation,” with a view to the future, and endeavouring to reconcile respect for cultural diversity with the inevitable requirements of French as the shared language.

At the same time, Québec faced the challenges of globalization and the new information society, which raised the essential question of relations between the national language and multilingualism in a new way. Who knows, with the construction of vast supranational entities, would it be possible for the French language in Québec, supported by French-speaking nations throughout the world, to regain the boldness of the first pioneers and again spread across the North-American space, not in a territorial sense, but in a virtual and cultural sense.

### ... A single movement

This was the path travelled in the course of four hundred years, as described briefly for each of its periods: the era of conquests, the century of resistance, the period of survival, and the period of reconquest. But the overall path, the movement which runs through all four periods, also merits examining. Three pairs of elements are worthy of note: *status-quality*, *identity-space* and *discourse-expression*. These, indeed, were governed by the same movement, which tended to liberate and reinforce the language, to give it the full capacity to express, represent and build solidarity in Québec society. These elements were among the most decisive and the most significant, those which were the most effective in conditioning the life and the spread of a language. Moreover, they corresponded to complex and widespread realities, and they sometimes intersected since their contents were not always mutually exclusive.

### **The Status and Quality of the Language**

In the beginning, during the French Regime and under the authority of the King, the status of the language was imposed upon everyone. Then, after the Conquest of 1760, its status deteriorated, reaching its lowest point between 1840 and 1848, when French was banished from the Legislative Assembly. The renewal began in 1867 (Confederation) with the full recognition of French in parliamentary and judicial institutions. However, the predominant use of English in the workplace and the economy undermined the status of French and of all those who spoke it, to

such a degree that it was not until the 1970s that the issue resurfaced and French could finally recover its status as the official and everyday language in Québec.

The perception of the quality of the language followed a path more or less similar to that of its status. We say “perception” because the standard applied to quality varied over the centuries. In addition, it often involved judgements from the outside based on a sample that was not representative of the population as a whole. At the end of the French Regime observers and visitors unanimously recognized that Canadians spoke a “pure French without any accent”! However, at the end of the British Regime, things were no longer seen in the same way: observers were surprised by “this curious sort of jargon,” a mixture of French and English, heard on the lips of the Canadians in the marketplace. Around the mid-nineteenth century, French in Canada was regarded as having descended to its lowest level. Then, by stigmatizing what they termed French Canadian patois, Anglo-Saxons only underlined the nefarious effects of two centuries of confrontation with English on the French language and on those speaking it. Today, finally, after the episode of *joual*, the French language is now judged to have climbed back up the slope and asserted itself as a modern and fully-developed language, in full possession of its Québécois and international attributes, with, moreover, a new definition of the quality and command of the language, more in keeping with contemporary sensibilities.

### **Identity and the Linguistic Space**

In the beginning, the dream was of a French empire that extended almost boundlessly across the entire North-American continent. Then considerable areas were amputated from the new British colony. Soon, the horizon further narrowed to Canada as a whole, of which the province of Québec became one of the four components. Finally, a century of life within Confederation gradually led Québec to define itself solely on the basis of its own boundaries. A parenthetical comment is appropriate here. If the geopolitical space increasingly shrank in the course of these four hundred years, the feeling of profound linguistic and cultural belonging nevertheless often spread beyond these spatial and temporal boundaries. For example, long after the Conquest of 1760, French continued to be the language of the fur trade of North America, and the dream of a

French America continued to be held until the end of the nineteenth century, sustained by the exodus of Québécois to the United States and by the remarkable fertility of the French Canadians.

Corresponding to these four successive spaces, which grew increasingly smaller, are four temporal phases of Québec identity, which are revealed in the historical names used to designate the French-speaking group since its origins: Canadian French, Canadian Creoles or Canadians during the French Regime, Canadians during the British Regime, French Canadians from the mid-nineteenth century until today, and Québécois from the 1960s through to the 1980s (because, since 1980, the term Québécois has tended to be increasingly used to designate all citizens of Québec).

Historically, these names have been used to distinguish Québécois from European French, then from the British, and after that from English Canadians, and finally from French Canadians. Throughout this history, they have thus referred to the approach adopted and the struggles undertaken to maintain their traditions, their rights, and their language, and to preserve and manage their living space against others.

In short, the chain has never been broken. The reconquest of the language and the expression of national sentiment to which it gave birth have been made possible by the strength of the sense of identity and the resistance that developed even before the Conquest. In this sense, the French Regime may be considered to be the crucible or incubator, and the British Regime the catalyst of identity, whereas the period of Confederation was the profound source of revelation, and the Quiet Revolution, the decisive marker. And nothing is as yet complete... In a plural society subjected to globalization, the contemporary period is already beginning to play its role of architect and rallying force.

### **Defending the Language and Enhancing its Renown**

As soon as the French language began to feel threatened, it started to assert itself. As it did so, it freed itself from its shackles, and consolidated its position. It thereby gave rise to an increasingly

structured system of defence and to increasingly dynamic and lively forms of literary and artistic expression.

**The linguistic discourse** which we refer to here concerns the language not as a system of expression but as a political issue and the symbol of a nation. This discourse accompanies the language and gives it much of its strength and dynamism. In Ancien Régime France, language was not a political issue as it is today, though the French Academy, founded by Richelieu in 1634, greatly contributed to consolidating the power and prestige of the monarchy. It was only thanks to the Revolution that, after 1789, language increasingly became a constituent element of nationality and national sentiment. In the British province of Québec, the first public debate on the use of the French language took place in the Legislative Assembly in 1792. It was of concern to Members of the Assembly but did not yet concern the population. Journalists tried to arouse public opinion but it was not until the Act of Union of 1840, when French was excluded from the Legislature, that the emergence of any nationalist sentiment, which would later give great importance to language, could be observed. Essentially, discourse on language at the time demanded a place for French alongside English.

For all intents and purposes, after the failure of the Rebellions of 1837-1838, discourse on language abandoned the political arena for nearly one hundred years and took refuge in associations and organizations of civil society, which were numerous at the time and closely monitored the language and maintained an ideology of pan-Canadian survival based on French-Canadian values. Discourse on language celebrated attachment to the French language and was divided on the question of bilingualism, beneficial to some but detrimental to others.

The Quiet Revolution was a great liberating force that gave free rein to a vigorous discourse of assertion and to demands focusing on language, which were based on the inequalities of which French Canadians were victims. Three factors were responsible for the power of this discourse. It had been long prepared during the previous hundred years. It resulted from the convergence of several groups (labour unions, associations, writers, political movements, and the new elite). Above all, though, for the first time it was taken up by the State, which took charge of it. Language became a public good that needed to be taken care of. Discourse on language became

resolutely political and gave rise to an unprecedented plethora of public debates and writings on language. It became central to Québec society. Finally, once Francophones had caught up, discourse on language increasingly turned to building a French-language society that would be open to cultural diversity.

In short, at the beginning of this four-hundred-year period, the French language only represented a personal means of communication. However, over the centuries, it became a constituent element of their nationality, a condition for the survival of a society attached to its values and its faith, and finally, the “living environment” and the critical element for the progress of an entire people and even an entire society.

**Literary expression** – and in a broader sense, artistic expression – constitutes, with discourse on language, a highly important element for defining and representing language. Its role is highlighted in each section of this book. A quotation from Gaston Miron will serve to summarize its influence: “The future of Québec literature and of its love story with the language is linked to the destiny of the people and of the culture that bears them.” Of course, the role of poets and writers is not necessarily to “defend” the language, but rather to “enhance its prestige.” However, through the mirror image they reflect of ourselves, as well as through their characters that embody society, they have often succeeded better than anyone else in making us aware of the condition of our language. A satire by Bibaud on Anglicisms, a few lines by Arthur Buies on our language, Miron’s account of his “linguistic alienation”, a paragraph by Beauchemin on public signs, or a song by Vigneault on “old words”, are these not often a more certain and durable means than a speech for language for gaining access to the popular imagination?

The sustained increase in Québec literary production since the nineteenth century and the unequalled summit of its expression that was reached during the first twenty years of the Quiet Revolution are the best examples of what a language can achieve when it regains its freedom and its means. In addition, since the art of the creator is closely linked to the conditions in which language and culture develop (mention need only be made, for example, of the absence of any printing works during the French Regime!), authors and artists have also fought for the setting up

of a set of institutional means, of tools of expression and of modern technologies in Québec society, which would be capable of fostering multimedia creation and the coming together of all the arts.

The themes we have just briefly outlined – and which the reader will follow in greater detail in this book – certainly constitute the conditions which are essential for the survival and development of a language. In order to live, a language must first be accepted and recognized. It therefore requires a *status* that is at once political, social, economic and cultural. This status makes it possible to generalize the use and usefulness of the language, while, at the same time, reinforcing the *identity* of the group speaking it. However, since language gives the group an image of itself, the group wishes to preserve its *quality*. The status-quality tandem thus becomes the best guarantee for the development of a language, which can then afford to express itself and create with complete freedom. And, to complete the full circle, *expression* and *creation* in turn strengthen the status and quality of the language, as well as the sense of identity of the group.

We hope that this voyage through time will lead readers, be they from Québec or elsewhere, to a better understanding of how and why, over the course of time, the French language has become the symbol that confers identity, the banner that rallies, and the element that unites and propels Québec society forward. At a time when they are turning resolutely toward the future to build together a new “nation” that shares a common language, this appropriation of the past and present is particularly necessary for all Québécois.

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