

52. French in Québec: A Standard to be Described and Uses to Be Prioritized

PIERRE MARTEL and HÉLÈNE CAJOLET-LAGANIÈRE

The Evolution of the Standard for Written and Spoken French in Québec

For more than two centuries, Québécois have lived in a twofold linguistic insecurity. On the one hand, French was rendered a second-class language by English, which was widely dominant in a number of social spheres and, on the other, its status was undermined compared to the French of France, the one and only benchmark.

The “*Joual* dispute” of the 1960s and 1970s crystallized opinions around a simplistic alternative: either the language of Québécois was the French of France (most usually termed International French **1**, chiefly in order to indicate no dependence on the mother country), in which case every effort would have to be made to conform to it on every point, or else theirs was the popular language of those who were little educated, that is, vernacular speech, stigmatized by the term “*Joual*,” which some associated with the very identity of the Québécois. This black and white representation of the state of our language was ideological and unrealistic. It was as if French was made up of only a “standard” level, the correct written usage, and as if Québec French had only one language level, the vernacular, and even the lax and vulgar language.

The Charter of the French Language, promulgated in 1977, contained no provision aimed at defining “French in Québec,” the “standard” or the “quality of the language.” However, the

Policy Statement that gave birth to the Charter drew attention to the necessity of having a quality language. Because it belongs to the French-speaking world, the Statement reads, “the language of Québec cannot be reduced to a regional phenomenon,” nor to “some damaged residual patois.”² It seems relatively clear that in the minds of those responsible for language policy, the French used in Québec, whilst it kept its particularities, corresponded to a norm that was relatively close to that of France. This is what the Conseil de la langue française, which the law made responsible for overseeing the development and the quality of the French language in Québec, noted in an opinion it addressed to the government in 1990.³ As a matter of fact, if its development over a long period is examined, it has to be noted that in recent decades Québec French has moved closer to international French.

French in Québec is No Longer “In Exile”

Despite this evident alignment with general French, several studies have drawn public attention to the defects and gaps in the most everyday and colloquial spoken language, as also in the written language of young Québécois. However, it cannot be said that the quality of language in Québec has been the subject of a veritable debate that would clarify matters. Among language specialists, though, the description of the state of the language in Québec has become much clearer since the adoption of the Charter. In 1977 professors of French, meeting in conference, declared that the French that should be taught in schools should be the “standard French from here” (“français standard d’ici”). This declaration, whose importance and conclusions never

found expression in teaching guidelines or programme syllabi, radically altered how the French spoken in Québec was perceived. The norm of “standard French from here” was no longer the French of Paris but that of the level of Québec language that corresponded to “the type of French that is socially valued and which the majority of French-speakers in Québec tend to use in formal communication.” In other words, Québécois possess their language in the same way as do the French but also as do Walloons and French-speakers in Switzerland. By “repatriating” the standard of Québec French, they have taken over their entire language.

When we say that the standard of Québec French has been “repatriated,” we simply mean that the language system in Québec possesses all the resources, all the tools and all the high standards it needs to manage itself and it no longer has to resort to the Parisian norm to be able to judge it. **4**

Québec French is now a complete and graded variant of French and is no longer drawn and quartered between a model situated in Paris and usage practiced in Québec. Québec French constitutes a whole, with as its principal level a model given value by general usage and also having other usages, some more lofty, such as the literary and poetic, and others more lax, as in the vernacular, patois (which some might call *Joual*), and the vulgar, etc. It is now necessary, then, to describe all these uses, to distinguish between levels and to make explicit a model, the standard model that belongs to Québécois alone, which they must endeavour to master. What, then, are the characteristics of this standard model of Québec French?

Principal Characteristics of Present-day Québec French

A model of pronunciation for Québec French emerged very early, one that lay between the rural model of preceding generations and the Parisian model judged to be “affected” and too “shrill” in the mouths of Québécois. This model developed especially among the people at Radio-Canada and was spread widely by journalists in government radio and television. Quite curiously, this “Radio-Canada” **5** model was not formalised in any way but it quickly imposed itself on the entire population which recognized that it was the proper way to pronounce French in Québec. **6**

For writing, no model of standard Québec French has been described and it remains implicit in Québec usage. The absence of such a description has even led some authors to say that none exists and that, indeed, when Québécois write they automatically adopt the international or French standard enshrined in European works. Other linguists, though, assert that it does exist:

A number of indices suggest that a public or, what is more, an official, use of the lexicon and especially the denomination vocabulary is being established. And this as much in the spoken as in the written language, of the elite, it goes without saying. **10**

Standard Québec French is to be found in high-prestige and high-quality texts. **11** A cursory examination of these texts reveals numerous Québec specificities compared to the spelling, syntax, morphological and lexical conventions enshrined in the dictionaries, books of grammar, and other reference works for so-called International French. The word “*canot*”

(written with a *t*) is an example of spelling characteristics that have passed into accepted use in French in Québec: it is obvious that in a Québec dictionary this word would not be qualified as “old,” “regional,” or “eighteenth century” as it would be in French dictionaries that only sanction current use in France.

Differences between Québec and France are also to be seen in writing conventions, typographic rules and usages, symbols and abbreviations. Without reproving the abbreviations *B^d*, *bd*, or *Bd*, used in France, the Commission de toponymie du Québec prefers the Québec abbreviation *boul.* for “*boulevard*.” Finally, the feminization of titles in Québec differs somewhat from French usage.

It is in the area of vocabulary, though, that the greatest numbers of Québec specificities are to be found. If the French and Québécois share the same language, they do not always use the same words and they give some words different meanings. These differences are to be found in all areas of everyday and professional life: new words, new meanings, new referents, new groups of words, all of which facilitate adapting to the Québec and North American context. These are a few examples chosen from among thousands:

- fauna and flora: *merle d'Amérique* (American robin), *outarde* (Canada goose; *bernache du Canada* in France), *ail des bois* (ramson; *ail doux* in France), *épinette* (spruce; *épicéa* in France), *achigan* (bass; *perche noire* in France), *érable à sucre* (sugar maple);
- foods: *pâté chinois* (shepherd's pie), *tourtière* (meat pie), *cretons* (cretons);

- government and social administration: *pension de vieillesse* (old age pension), *âge d'or* (golden age: the elderly; *aînés, retraités* in France), *carte-soleil* (health insurance card), *autopatrouille* (patrol car), *caisse populaire* (Québec credit union);
- education: *baccalauréat* (bachelor's degree; *licence* in France), *décrocheur* (dropout), *finissant* (senior in high school or university), *polyvalente* (secondary school), *douance* (giftedness);
- commerce: *vente-débarras* (garage sale), *dépanneur* (convenience store), *pourvoirie/pourvoyeur* (outfitter);
- institutions: *câblodistributeur* (cable distributor), *théâtre d'été* (summer theatre), *centre d'accueil* (visitor centre, foster home or long-term care centre), *écotourisme* (ecotourism);
- geography: *embâcle* (ice-jam; *des glaces* in French), *sapinage* (fir bush), *rang* (district), *acériculture* (maple-syrup production);
- cloth: *catalogne* (catalogne);
- finally, among word groupings and expressions, we can cite: *donner l'heure juste* (to tell it as it is), *ne pas dérougir* (not to give up), etc.

These particular and characteristic words, meanings and uses are part of standard Québec French, and are not colloquialisms. A fair number of them are not yet to be found in existing French dictionaries or else are not recognized in them as they should be. They deserve to be included and described in reference works that are accessible to the entire Québec linguistic community.

Borrowings from English and Linguistic Insecurity

Everyone knows that, because it has been subjected to the marked influence of North-American English, Québec French contains borrowings from English and that, throughout its history, combating these Anglicisms has been for some a kind of “obsession.” **13** Even so, the conclusions of a recent research study allow us to put this phenomenon into perspective. Out of 4,216 “criticized borrowings” from the English that were examined **14**, more than 93 per cent are little used, while nearly 60 per cent of them are not used at all by Québécois, either in speech or in writing. These findings will have to be confirmed using a larger corpus but already they encourage us to analyze the Anglicization phenomenon in a more objective light.

At the same time, a good number of Anglicisms are rejected in Québec but are accepted in France: *traversier* (ferry), *salle de quilles* (bowling alley), *commanditer/parrainer* (to sponsor), *bâton* (stick), *escalier mobile* (escalator), *légère* (*bière*; light beer), *vert* (the green in golf), *pigiste* (free-lance), are usually used whilst in France, they say, instead, *ferry-boat*, *bowling*, *sponsoriser*, *stick*, *escalator*, *light*, *green*, and *free-lance*.

Reinforcing the status of French in Québec and the new confidence Québécois have in their language both act as enhanced protection against any undue intrusion of English. Québécois work on terminology, carried out by the Office de la langue française, in concert with business concerns, has shown Québec’s capacity for giving good French names in the most diverse and advanced fields of activity and modern technology. It is also clear that young Québécois no

longer cut sorry figures in international tests of written French. **15** What remains to be done now is to reinforce the systematic teaching of French and to emphasize the norm for “standard French from here,” as revealed in the writings of the best Québec authors.

The Importance of Describing the Enhanced Status of the Language in Québec 16

Québec is no longer a society of translation but one of expression. **17** French is no longer just a medium of communication: it has become a living environment, the expression of an identity. Québécois do not just use French, they live in French. They constitute a fully-fledged French society, with its own values and references, which differ from those in France. These differences are reflected in their language and its standards. A Québécois and a person from France can both speak an excellent French but with variations in pronunciation and words. And the same words will not always have the same resonance and evoke the same reality on both sides of the Atlantic.

These specificities peculiar to Québécois do not call into question the existence of a French “common trunk” from which all French-speakers gain sustenance. On the other hand, it is important to establish the links between Québec words and other French words, for the ones are not in competition with the others but rather in a situation of complementarity. Québécois have adopted an international language of quality which they hope to share with all the French-speaking world. Moreover, it might be added that some Québec words have already been accepted or recommended at the international level, such as *traversier* (ferry), *stationnement* (parking), *magasinage* (shopping), *logiciel* (computer software), and *terminologue* (terminologist).

Describing Québec linguistic specificities is not only necessary for enriching the French language. It is also urgent for the modern programming tools that have to be developed to cope with the continuing development of information technologies. It is dictated, first and foremost, however, by the fundamental necessity of enabling Québécois to get to know the entire structure of their language and gain access to its different usages.

Once the Standard Language has been Described, Its Mastery has to be Fostered

Mastering the language means first of all knowing and correctly using the codes that define the system of communication. It also means mastering its different usages and the hierarchical organization of these usages and, finally, using the latter depending on situations of communication. Once the desired standard has been established, that is to say respect for the codes of the language, including our particularities, it will then be possible to talk about mastering all its elements. And it thus becomes possible to advocate that this standard, and at the same time the quality of the language, both oral and written, be respected. In the present and future context of an information society, mastering the model of French with the highest status becomes at once a necessity and a professional asset. The odds are that pressure will be increasingly strong for schools to put on the labour market an increased number of school-leavers, who are more effective in this regard, than they have in the past.