

School language and demosociolinguistic context in francophone children and young adults in Canada outside of Quebec: a warning for the Catalan situation

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"When we are together, we speak French, don't we?"

(A girl, in English, to her French-speaking friend answering a questionnaire on use of French)¹

Summary

1. Background and justification
2. Results
3. Comparisons with Catalonia
4. References

1. Background and justification ²

One of the most problematic issues of Catalan sociolinguistic situation is that of the real effects of school language policy on the immigrant origin population, particularly those of second - or even third - generation Spanish-speaking families from other parts of the Iberian Peninsula. Generally, public education uses the 'language conjunction' system, which, for pupils with L1 other than Catalan, is based on 'immersion' methodology (early exposure of a child to a language other than that of the family). The psycholinguistic and pedagogical aspects of this system have been studied and theorized upon, but its sociolinguistic aspect has been considered to a much lesser extent. Several studies (see for example Vila i Moreno, 1996), reveal consistently serious indicators suggesting that the expected increased use of Catalan as a habitual language in relationships between pupils, actually occurs very little in informal linguistic contexts. When this increase occurs, it does so in sociolinguistic and demographic contexts that are already very favourable to Catalan. In situations with equal numbers of individuals with L1 Catalan and L1 Spanish, or where the latter prevail, everyday non-formal use of the historical language of Catalonia is somewhat low; Spanish tends to be used in the vast majority of intergroup relationships, despite the fact that Catalan is the predominant institutional and vehicular language.

We therefore need to make adequate hypotheses about the dynamics of the situation, in order to correct the factors causing this lack of progress in Catalan and enabling the continued application of the intergroup norm favouring the use of Spanish also among new generations. In addition to research that may be carried out on-site in Catalonia, we need to seek out other perspectives to compare the situation adequately, and to discover the hidden

¹ Taken from Boudreau, Françoise. "La francophonie ontarienne au passé, au present et au futur: un bilan sociologique", in: Cotnam et al. (1995), pp. 17-51, quoting a phrase cited by Roger Bernard.

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factors and phenomena influencing the Catalan situation that may only be visible when approached from a broader angle linked to other cases, where they can appear more clearly.

The Catalan situation combines the influence of current educational factors with those of a sociolinguistic and demographic nature and with the legacy of an unfavourable past political and linguistic situation. The normal exerted influence of the education system is affected by the diverse origin of the individuals forming class-groups and, among other aspects, by the inherited social norm dictating that individuals with Catalan L1 should change to the language of those with Spanish L1 during interaction, not the other way around. As we said above, this situation results in a low use of Catalan in informal conversation at schools in Catalonia, even by native individuals, who quickly adapt to the social use of Spanish. Despite the general Catalan standardization and diffusion process in place since the end of the Franco dictatorship, the intergroup use of Spanish language may have still become generally predominant in this generation.

It is not an easy task to find other sociolinguistic situations bearing similarities to Catalan case, which includes at the same time daily group contact, important demographic and sociolinguistic aspects, school language policy, and a context of full or partial language officialization. One potentially interesting situation for theory and practice is that of the Francophone population of Canada outside of Quebec. Although Francophone Canadians outside of Quebec are protected under a federal, official language framework, they often find themselves in a minority situation due to the demolingistic numbers of English-speakers; these latter generally form the bulk of the population in Canadian provinces outside of Quebec. However, despite their demolingistic minority, the vast majority of these French-speakers manage their own schools and receive federal language protection; this is used to maintain and develop school networks in French in an attempt to maintain their code in these minority situations and ensure its future reproduction (see Martel, 1995).

2. Results

2.1 The demographic and sociolinguistic situation of French-speakers in Western Canada

As revealed in earlier research (see Bastardas, 1999a), the Francophone population of the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta is a clear demographic and sociolinguistic minority, since its members account for less than 5% of the inhabitants of both provinces. However, French is co-official with English across federal Canada. This allows for radio and television broadcasting in French throughout Canada, commercial labelling in both languages, being addressed in French by the federal government –although not in all branches – and, most importantly, self-management of schools. This is to say that Francophone communities can currently control their schools, govern them, and – within general limits – schedule their specific aims and teaching.

The self-government of schools is what makes the experience of Francophone Canadians outside of Quebec particularly interesting for sociolinguistic theory; it provides a clearer perspective of the factors and dynamics at play in the relationships between school language policy, demographic and sociolinguistic conditions and language uses in diverse social situations.

2.2 Fundamental variables

The results of school language policy must never be evaluated in isolation, but always in their relationship with the demographic and sociolinguistic context of the policy in question. Bearing this in mind, a fundamental factor in this type of situation – as occurs in other cases of minoritization studied – is the sociolinguistic consequence of inter-ethnic marriage,

particularly where group barriers are removed to a great extent and the number of such family units is therefore high and rising.

In Alberta and British Columbia for example, English is the predominant language in the home for the vast majority of mixed marriages, both between the couple themselves and between parents and children, almost always to the detriment of French. Since English is the code that is best shared between the couple and since it is used more in the general social environment, in practice, it becomes the only domestic language, because the English-speaking partner very often has difficulties even understanding French.

There are large numbers of this type of couple: in Alberta, for example, three quarters of the partners of French-speakers are Anglophones. The children of these inter-ethnic couples often attend the theoretically Francophone schools so as not to 'lose' their French. As a result, these centres are dominated by individuals whose L1 is English, despite having one parent from each language group. In practice therefore, for Francophone parents, these self-governed schools must act not simply as 'maintainers', but also bilingualizers – both at written and oral level – for this group of individuals whom the law recognizes as 'Francophone', although their L1 is not French.

This population of mixed origin that functions in English will create other sociolinguistic effects. The vast majority of individuals that could have French as their L1 are also functional bilinguals in English due to the pressure of their social context. As a result, English is used more than French in informal, interpersonal and everyday communication between pupils at these Francophone schools. English is unconsciously and mechanically adopted as the 'natural' language for personal functions, whereas French is reserved for more formal and institutionalized functions (vehicular language of classes, addressing teachers, writing up projects, etc.).

The issue, therefore, is not whether bilingualization in French has been successful, but rather that the dynamics of the situation cause English, rather than the language of ascendants, to be more commonly used in everyday interpersonal functions, even in 'intragroup' relations between individuals of Francophone origin (either entirely or partly). Clearly, this does not imply a positive outcome for maintenance of the Francophone minority in Western Canada, because it means that its first-language speakers are gradually diminishing and that this group is therefore becoming increasingly dependent on the education system to conserve the language. This latter is not the same as intergenerational transmission of language varieties, which 'naturally' ensures the nativization – and hence historical reproduction – of language groups.

2.3 Causes of the sociolinguistic evolution

We need to take a close look at how demographic and sociolinguistic factors initiate this perverse dynamic causing the language group and use of French, in this case, to dwindle. It is not so much the idea that education is a 'failure' as the difficulty in altering sociolinguistic dynamics activated by demographic and sociological factors. Very often, the Francophone community is mixed with the English-speaking population or individuals of other origins (in large cities, for example). As the former is a smaller community, its members are more prone to find a partner from outside rather than within their own community. It is also much more likely for French speakers to function communicatively in English than for English speakers to do so in French.

In the face of these dynamics, how far can education influence the aim of making French, at the very least, the most commonly-used code between individuals of purely French or mixed origin? What factors come into play here?

In the same way that macrosociolinguistic factors are important for a global understanding of evolutionary dynamics, *microsociolinguistic* factors are important for understanding

individual linguistic behaviours. Why do pupils at these schools not use French with each other in non-formal functions, when French is the habitual vehicular language of these schools and their aim is clearly to promote the culture and identity of French-speakers?

To understand this phenomenon, we probably need to take into account two fundamental factors: firstly, individual language competence when the class-group is formed and, secondly, the tendency to establish the regular nature of interpersonal language behaviour in terms of person-language, which notably favours the maintenance of the linguistic choice made at the start of the relationship with a given interlocutor.

Differences in initial individual competence can explain to a large extent why English is used for interpersonal colloquial functions. When the class-group is formed, the language that best permits communication between individuals is English, rather than French. The latter is underdeveloped for many, particularly in terms of expression, whereas English is generally the first language of pupils of mixed origin. Moreover, individuals with L1 French have a sufficient command of English because they are exposed to it in their sociolinguistic context. Even in communities that were predominantly French-speaking (Saint-Paul, in Alberta, for example) subsequent population shifts have led to frequent contact with non-Francophone individuals. Early exposure to English, therefore, may also occur on an interpersonal level and not merely through the media or signage.

This leaning towards English at the point when the class-group is formed makes this the language usually chosen by this 'microsociety' of pupils for their general relationships with each other. However, individuals from families that only speak French may prefer to speak with one another in French, particularly if others present at least understand the code, since they have a command of this language. Nevertheless, the general language of non-formal school life tends to be English rather than French.

In time, individuals with L1 English will improve their command of French and most probably become capable of expressing themselves in this language with a certain degree of comfort. However, their French will never compare to their fluency and spontaneity in English. Thus, if they have a choice, they will generally choose English rather than French for interpersonal communication. This is sustained by the emphasis placed by the education system on writing and grammar, rather than on expression, enjoyment and leisure functions which correspond to interpersonal relationships, particularly at these ages.

The tendency to conserve initial language choices accounts for the rest. Once an individual has decided to use English to communicate with an interlocutor, that language will tend to be used from this point onwards, unless the promotion of ethnic awareness leads to a rethinking of established language choices. Throughout their school-life, and afterwards in other social areas, these individuals of Francophone and/or mixed origin will tend to speak English instead of French, despite perhaps expressing sympathy for their origins and for the maintenance and promotion of French.

3. Comparisons with Catalonia

Many of the comments we have made about Canada can also be applied to the situation in certain areas of Catalonia. Except for cases in which the majority of the school population has L1 Catalan and, hence, usually use this language in class-group relationships, we very often find mixed groups – individuals with L1 Catalan and L1 Spanish. In these cases, although Catalan is the habitual vehicular language of education, Spanish rather than Catalan is more commonly used for informal, interpersonal communication. It is used by L1 Spanish individuals when talking amongst themselves and by L1 Catalan individuals when addressing their L1 Spanish classmates. In groups with more L1 Spanish individuals or where a large proportion are children from mixed marriages, we even find L1 Catalan individuals

using Spanish with each other, because they adapt their language choices to those that predominate in the school micro-society of which they form part.

I therefore believe that the Catalan situation could also be affected by the factors mentioned above in the Canadian situation. Initial command of language is unequal even at nursery school level, since many L1 Catalan individuals will have been exposed to Spanish – even through the language uses of their own parents – to a much greater degree than L1 Spanish individuals will have been exposed to Catalan, given that many immigrant parents are not generally bilingual speakers. Even today, many individuals in Catalonia generally have a higher level of exposure to Spanish than Catalan. Moreover, whereas much of the native population lives alongside Spanish-speaking individuals, fewer members of the alloctonous population live in everyday contact with Catalan-speakers due to their residential distribution whereby a large number of these individuals were concentrated in quasi-segregated and often self-sufficient areas. In addition to this, exposure to audio-visual mass media, labelling, advertising, administrative forms and documents of many businesses, etc. (still predominantly Spanish) reveal that this context facilitates Spanish more than it does Catalan, particularly for the majority of the population with L1 Spanish concentrated in metropolitan areas.

This initial asymmetry, in addition to the possible continued influence of the adult norm of immediately switching to Spanish when communicating with a 'non-Catalan-speaking' individual, could best explain the apparent 'mystery' of the predominance of Spanish over Catalan in relations between boys and girls from different linguistic groups. As in the Canadian case, the tendency to conserve initial language choices favours the subsequent use of Spanish, even where L1 Spanish individuals have a good communicative command of Catalan, unless the L1 Spanish individual indicates to their L1 Catalan interlocutor that they would like to be spoken to in Catalan and the L1 Catalan interlocutor agrees to change his or her language choice.

The residential concentration (and subsequent quasi-segregation) of many L1 Spanish individuals in Catalonia is characteristic of the Catalan situation. The demolinguiistic composition of schools in Catalan metropolitan areas logically reproduces that of society in general, and that of the neighbourhood or area in particular. Therefore, this demolinguiistic distribution produces a situation whereby a high number of schools have a clear majority or all pupils with L1 Spanish and very scarce or no personal contact with Catalan-speakers, except for teachers.

Thus, conversational command of Catalan in this type of situation can be somewhat underdeveloped since Catalan will never or very rarely be the language used in everyday social interaction between these boys and girls, who will see the use of their own varieties in these functions as 'natural'. Due to a lack of frequent, regular contact with classmates of native origin, these individuals may obtain full command of Catalan from a formal point of view but not feel comfortable using Catalan in non-formal speech. For these individuals, the question of language choice comes down to the language they must use with teachers – with whom they may sometimes speak in Spanish instead of Catalan – since their environment generally lacks a sufficient number of L1 Catalan peers with whom they can communicate in this language. Bilingualization, therefore, can be restricted to formal oral and written contexts and individuals can fail to reach the level of comfortable colloquial and mechanical use of Catalan in conversation, as they would use Spanish.

We could fairly accurately outline the evolution in Catalonia according to the diverse demographic and sociolinguiistic areas: areas dominated – although not exclusively – by Catalan, others that are mixed, and others where Spanish is clearly the everyday, predominant language, albeit with progressive levels of bilingualization (not used?) in Catalan. The great population shifts of this century prevent us from seeing the Catalan case as a habitual process of integration and/or – in the long-term – assimilation of the descendants of migrant populations. It is very likely that the index of intergenerational

language shift from Spanish to Catalan will be low and that, as a result, the linguistic physiognomy of the country will change little in social terms. The question therefore is, not whether immigrants will assimilate into L1 Catalan group, but whether the autochthonous population will take the first steps on the long road towards assimilation into L1 Spanish group. This outcome should not probably happen because they would do so conscientiously, but as a result of the above demographic and sociolinguistic dynamics (mixed marriage with loss of L1 Catalan unilinguals, increased population mixing, reproduction of the intergroup norm favouring Spanish, etc.) in an international and State context whereby Spanish is considered to be a strong, extensive language, capable of serving a vast area of the planet.

Despite the policy of language standardization and diffusion carried out over recent years and the fact that Catalan is official in Catalonia, demographic and sociolinguistic constraints could also take effect and push the situation, albeit slowly, towards undesirable dynamics for language continuity. It may well be time to start seeing the evolution of the L1 Catalan population not only as a demographic minority in Spain, but also in its own historical territory, with all the changes that this will have on the conceptual paradigm, legitimating discourse and the application of effective policies of functional compensation. We need imagination, action research, creativity and socio-political participation if we are to create a situation in Catalonia whereby at least the language competence and uses of the population are properly distributed and equally compensated, thus ensuring a sociocultural ecosystem capable of stabilizing Catalan in the future in its own historic territory.

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