

# Monitoring change over time in the in Quebec language situation: a project with a set agenda

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## Abstract

The Office quebécois de la langue française (Quebec Office for the French Language) was recently given a mandate to monitor ongoing change in the Quebec language situation, and reporting at least every five years to the minister. Carrying out this task should be seen as a continuation of work done in the nineties. Taking this as the point of departure, the author presents the issues and the preparatory work prior to the implementation of the mandate, together with the programme providing the structure for the upcoming *Bilan* or Survey (of the state of the language). In terms of dissemination strategies for making findings known, the author echoes a decision taken by the Monitoring Committee. Rather than waiting for the official report required by law to come out before publishing the updated or newly formulated indicators - plus the research carried out on these issues - the emerging information should be published in instalments on the Internet. The plan for the Survey will therefore be to integrate all the indicators produced, to arrive at a clear diagnosis, hopefully.

## Summary

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## 1. Introduction

On the 1st October 2002, within the framework of the most recent modifications of the French Language Charter, the Quebec Office for the French Language was given the mandate of surveying the ongoing change in the linguistic situation in Quebec and to report on this, at least once very five years to the Minister, with particular attention to usage and status of the French language together with the attitudes and behaviour patterns of the different language groups. (L.R.Q., c. C-11, a. 160).

It is both astonishing and interesting that such a mandate should be included in the French Language Charter. Indeed, for those who have been watching the language situation in Quebec, it is plain that organised monitoring of the Quebec language situation was not fully in place until the nineties, although efforts towards *francisation* had officially begun well before this, in the seventies. A number of pieces of research had been mounted (in the work domain, in the media and the services; on the attitudes of the different language groups; and on the quality and mastery of the French spoken) and there was a large quantity of administrative data available. Yet little effort had been made up until that point to bring together all such data and arrive at a reliable diagnosis of the language situation. In the course of the 90s, however, the will to do this saw the light of day, and gave rise to a number of precedents which we shall be looking at in the first part of this article, precedents which inspired the idea of monitoring as laid down subsequently by law. This obligation to report periodically on the evolution of the language situation is interesting in that it ensured

recognition of the need to evaluate results of the application of language policy actions. It provides the government with the means of monitoring the situation and to react to need. The second part of this article will therefore focus on the work carried out or now planned in this new context of legal requirement.

## 2. Some precedents

In 1992, the Conseil de la langue française (French Language Council) in collaboration with other organisations created as a result French Language Charter: the Office de la langue française (French Language Office) the Commission de protection de la langue française (Commission for the Protection of the French Language) and the Commission de toponymie (Place Name Commission) together with the Secretariat of Language Policy, all began to work in earnest on this approach. The publication of the article *Indicateurs de la situation linguistique au Québec* (Indicators of the Language Situation in Quebec) (1992) constituted an important "first" in this work in Quebec, even if intentionally limited. The economic situation at that time did not permit the implementation of further data collecting, and it was decided rather to limit the project to processing existing data, bringing all the data together and organising them around major themes. In this way, a sort of instrument panel for *francisation* in Quebec was achieved. The article in question, then, provided information on population, immigration, education, work, earnings, communications, the culture, the certification of companies and government organisations, and place names. It is important to note that the article has never been republished since that date, but a certain number of indicators used in it were brought up to date in 1995 on the occasion of the *Bilan* or Survey of the language situation which we shall comment upon further, below.

In 1994, the same team continued the work begun in 1992, probing further into the question of language in the workplace and making use of sixty-one indicators. This analysis included a large number of dimensions of language use in this domain, making it possible to articulate a set of indicators for the world of work that in turn would reveal the factors favouring or disfavouring the use of French. This work only served to pave the way for a more comprehensive survey which was soon after to be entrusted by the Government of the time to an Interministerial Committee.

The latter was called for and set up in 1995, and findings were published in 1996 (Comité interministériel..., 1996). After 1977, it seemed that in addition to some important changes in the language legislation<sup>1</sup>, Quebec society was facing certain new needs, fed mainly by the demographic-linguistic context, by the globalisation of the economy and by the rise of the new information technologies. It was this which apparently led the Interministerial committee to examine the state of the French language in a large number of spheres in Quebec society. Thus, the survey covered the language of the workplace, the *francisation* of companies, the language of trade and commerce, the language of Government offices and quasi-public organisations, the language of education, the language of integration of immigrants, the language of cultural practices and French in the globalisation of trade and information. It could be seen that long road had been travelled since 1977 toward normal and habitual use of French in Quebec. Indeed, overall progress was clearly observable in the direction of generalised use of French in different domains. For example, a large majority of young immigrants were attending French language schools and use of French in the business world had grown. All the same, there was still along way to go before French became the common language of the people of Quebec.

Another sizeable operation was also undertaken during 2000-2001 by the Commission des États généraux (General states Commission) on the current situation and future prospects of the French language in Quebec. This commission had as its mandate to identify and analyse the main factors influencing the present and future fortunes of French in Quebec, to look at the perspectives and the priorities for relevant action, to proceed to the examination of the relevant articles of the French language charter and, in general, present recommendations to

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<sup>1</sup> These changes are to a large extent the result of the unilateral imposition, in 1982, of a Canadian Constitution and a Canadian Charter of rights and freedoms.

ensure the use, diffusion and quality of the French language in Quebec (Commission des États généraux..., 2001 : i). Unlike the Interministerial Committee which strove to «provide a statistical portrait of the situations observed whenever the data were available» (Interministerial Committee ..., 1996 : 219), this commission chose rather, in carrying out its mandate, to hold «hearings in all parts of Quebec as well as national hearings», to organise «thematic seminars and an international colloquium on precise, neuralgic issues relating to the future of French in Quebec» (Commission..., 2001 : i). This then, was to be a qualitative type of Survey taking stock of the considerable progress made since 1977 (for example in the sphere of the language of education, the language of business and commerce and the *francisation* of companies). However, the commissions also observed that this situation was not irreversible. In their view, «it would take little to break this social cohesion. There were new pressures, arising from economic and social changes on the international level which tended to impose English over French, so that certain setbacks and plateau effects were now observable in Quebec.» (Commission..., 2001 : 10). In short, this fact strongly suggested the Government should provide means of monitoring the evolution of the language situation in Quebec. They did so by writing into the law 104 (L.Q. 2002, c. 28) the need to monitor the situation in the Province and report to the Minister every five years.

### 3. Monitoring the language situation

According to the latest modifications to the French Language Charter, a new Survey should be produced before October 2006, the anniversary of the date that Law 104 (L.Q. 2002, c. 28) came into force. How to set about producing such a Survey? This was the general question that the research team at the Quebec French Language Office first addressed. And there was no easy answer.

Should one start afresh, or build on what had already been done? Which perspectives should be adopted? Who should do what? How to do it and when to do it? With what budgets? How to disseminate findings, and when? Those were some of the specific questions which were put on the table and for which it seemed important to find answers as swiftly as possible.

Furthermore, the law stipulated the setting up of a committee to monitor the language situation consisting of a «president, selected from members of the Office», a «secretary, chosen from its staff» and of «three people who are not members of the Office or its staff». The law also mentioned that the Committee for monitoring the linguistic situation should also, by law, contain «at least two specialists in demographics or sociolinguistics» (L.R.Q., c. C-11, to. 165.12). There were, then, other questions in addition to those we have already mentioned. Who would take part in this committee? What would this committee's role be, and how would its members liaise with the research team and external collaborators?

And what would this committee's mandate be? The law stated that the committee monitoring the language situation should submit to «the Office, at its request or on their own initiative, proposals and opinions» (L.R.Q., c. C-11, a. 165.11). But how should this be interpreted, exactly? The research team posed the question as did the members of the Committee. It was this which led the latter to define their mandate in the following way:

- a) put forward proposals to the Office quebécois de la langue française (OQLF) regarding the type of research carried out to effectively monitor ongoing change in the language situation;
- b) provide opinions on the scientific quality of the research and the associated indicators developed in that framework;
- c) provide the OQLF with opinions and proposals on the actions to take arising out of the research.

So the broad nature of the mandate from the Legislature led the research team to reflect on the ways in which such a Survey could be carried out. It soon emerged that the work could not be left to our internal resources alone. One lesson that could be drawn from experience up to this point was that such an operation very obviously could not be carried out without a substantial input from other collaborators. (Georgeault, 2003 : 359), or without turning to a recognised scientific committee that would play that role. Also, we had from the outset

considered involving a certain number of partners or associates who would work with the Monitoring committee. We shall look at this question below:

### *3.1 Preparing the ground*

The whole range of these issues also led the research team of the Office quebecois de la langue française to look at the best means of carrying out the mandate from the Government. The first important decision was to use the indicators that had already been published and the surveys that had already been carried out and submit all of this to a group of experts, members of the Monitoring Committee and others. Another decision, - not the least important - was that of setting up two working groups for the questions that had not been formally addressed previously, the quality and mastery of the French language and behaviour and attitudes of the different language groups.

#### *3.1.1 Brain-storming Session*

The idea of consulting experts lead the research team in November 2002 to organise a brain-storming session on the following questions, already covered by the 1996 Survey: language and population, language and immigration, language and education, language and communications, language and information technology, language and earnings, *francisation* of the workplace, and finally the language of business and commerce. The objectives of this session had been defined in the following way :

- a) orientating the research as quickly as possible in the domains;
- b) obtaining scientific opinion from researchers in this area;
- c) structuring vertically the work that needed to be carried out to achieve proper monitoring;
- d) examine the means that would have to be put in place to ensure improved partnership (another session, colloquia, stages...).

In fact, in connection with the decisions already taken (based on the indicators already published and the Surveys already carried out, ensuring the proper functioning of the event) the following works constituted the main items on the agenda at the session: *Indicateurs de la situation linguistique au Québec* (1992 Edition); the *Indicateurs de la langue du travail au Québec* (1994 Edition) and the *Rapport du Comité interministériel sur la situation de la langue de travail, 1996*. From this point of departure we were able to decide which indicators to bring up to date, which to reject and which new indicators to develop (based on research already completed and on upcoming research). Apart from the critiques thus provided, all equally relevant, a large number of proposals were also put forward, which will undoubtedly enable us to carry out a more complete and more scientific Survey than before.

#### *3.1.2 Setting up of two working groups*

Besides consulting the experts via a brain-storming session, two teams of experienced researchers in the field and in connected fields were also set up to orientate the work on the question of the quality and mastery of French of behaviour and attitudes of the different language groups.

The consultation begun at the end of autumn 2002 was to be finished by March 2003 so that this could be taken into consideration in the work programme for 2003-2004 about which we shall have more to say below.

The working group on the behaviour and attitudes of the different language groups had been given the mandate to propose five-year programmes of research that would provide reliable monitoring of the behaviour and attitudes of the different language groups in Quebec. This, among other things, would make it clear what the axes of the research under the new mandate issued by the law had to be. This would determine the lines of research which could form part of the next five-year research programme.

The working group on the quality and mastery of French had received a similar mandate to the preceding group, that of proposing a way of assessing the quality and mastery of the language which would enable reliable monitoring to be carried out on the Quebec situation. However, the objectives pursued by this last group differed from the other, given the subject of the investigation and the often antagonistic positions that this subject provoked. Also, it had to document and take stock of the various positions relative to the quality and mastery

of the French used, uncover points of convergence among the different positions observed, determine the orientations that ought to underlie the work in this field and single out the research domains that form part of the next five-year research programme on quality of and mastery in the language.

The presentation of conclusions arrived at by the two groups is a task that goes beyond the bounds of this article. However, we have to say that the main conclusions have been included in the working plan for the year 2003-2004 and will be in the subsequent years, so that they will be briefly touched upon when looking at the selected subject areas.

### *3.2 Working schedule*

From this point of departure a programme of work or schedule was worked out for the year 2003-2004 with the avowed objective of proceeding, in the first place, to bring up to date the main indicators already published to then be in a better position to determine the indicators needed to be developed to complete the Survey, as a part of future work schedules. In fact, all the indicators presented to the experts found to be relevant have been written into the work schedules for the current year, a work schedule which in any case has been ratified by the Quebec Language Situation Monitoring Committee. This planning obviously went beyond the capacities of production of the Office's research team; there also had to be collaboration from various different partners who were approached and who all agreed to take part.

The working schedule therefore included ten different focal areas, all of lesser or greater importance, at least for the purposes of the current year. Indeed, it is quite possible that for a given subject area, there might be few indicators to bring up to date, but which in the next work schedules, there would be much more development to be done.

The great majority of the projects planned for the current year will obviously have to do with the areas of language and population and language and immigration. The recent publication of the 2001 census data explains in very large part the investment in these particular areas. In the case of the language and population focus, for example, the indicators relating to demographic-linguistic factors will be brought up to date (mother tongue, language spoken in the home, knowledge of French and English, main (official) language spoken) as will those relating to certain associated phenomena, such as linguistic transfer, fertility and inter-provincial migration. Having said that, there are obviously other important topics on the agenda for other years, for example, to mention but one: the change in the demographic weight of francophones in certain territories, the impact of exogamy (marrying out of the community) and the effect on linguistic behaviour in the home.

The language and immigration area includes both the new census data and the administrative data. In this context, the main demographic-linguistic variables previously under scrutiny will be given special treatment, as will certain associated phenomena. Among other aspects, the period of immigration will be a weighty variable of considerable importance. As for the administrative data, they will allow us to take a different and certainly more reliable look at this focus area, more especially the data on knowledge of French and English. Following this updating process, several themes emerge, for instance, the resulting immigration or the «retention» phenomenon, the language choice of the immigrants and the consequences of concentrations of immigrants.

The language and education focus covers a vast domain, since it relates to the linguistic situation proper in all the levels of education from nursery school to the universities. Besides evaluating the direct effect that the law has had on attendance of English-medium primary and secondary schools, it will also enable us to estimate how many students who could have attended English-medium schools in fact opted to study in French. The data relating to colleges attended will make it possible, in turn, to gauge number of secondary school students who change the language of instruction when they go to college: information on university attendance will enable us to arrive at figures on the access there is, by language group, to university degree programmes and the gaining of university degrees. Subsequent to this updating of our information, in all probability many other projects will be proposed,

for example looking at the illiteracy rate and school drop-out figures by language group and the language of instruction used in ongoing or tertiary education.

The language and work focus has been given considerable attention over the years. The list of indicators to bring up to date in this domain is therefore very long, referring to a large number of data from the census (active population, profession, economic sector, etc.) and numerous pieces of diachronic research. Furthermore the 2001 census included a new question in its questionnaire «In this job what language does this person use most often (regularly)», a question which seems very promising, especially in determining the language spoken in a given territory. Beyond that, many research projects were also suggested at the brain-storming session, projects which one day or another in the future are likely to attract our attention, especially the idea of reformulating questions relating to the language at the workplace to adapt them to the realities of the present-day work market.

The language and IT focus is by far the least developed as regards the current year. It will be limited to data from recent questionnaires administered in small and medium-sized companies. That being so, we will need to seek to develop this area of interest over the course of the next years, notably in determining the constituent elements of the so-called high tech sectors and seeking to explain what it is that favours the use of English in information technology.

The language and earnings area currently boasts only a few indicators that have been developed and which can be brought up to date. However, this is an important domain to investigate, looking at the benefits tied to bilingualism and those that go with trilingualism, a phenomenon which is likely to grow. And it will be important not to stop there, but to extend these economic approaches to other categories and to other workers and, as far as is possible, even to non-workers.

The language and culture area covers, for its part, the very wide field of cultural practices, either in the press, on television, on radio, publishing and cinema. Over the course of the current year we need to use the existing data and bring up to date the different indicators already in existence, to be able to organise research providing greater insight into and understanding of the Quebec people and their language in general and the different cultural communities in particular.

The attitudes and behaviour of language groups approach should first of all go for the development of instrumentation in collection. What is more, we shall be working during this current year towards the production and testing of appropriate questionnaires aimed at addressing the most meaningful questions regarding identity, questions which will then be included in a general questionnaire will not reach its final form until various associated sub-projects are carried out.

The tasks set the working group on the quality and mastery of the French language have been given the go-ahead to give the spoken language priority. Also, the most principal studies carried out in this domain will be on the oral language of readers of novels, and on the spoken French of future teachers. Having said that, it is important to mention that in this domain, there is everything to do before we can really evaluate the quality and the mastery of French and that, accordingly, we are aware that the evaluation that is going to be carried out for the next Survey will be very limited.

### *3.3 Diffusion strategies*

The working schedule for the next year, an ambitious one, especially in the area where we have the objective of making known our ongoing work by instalments. Indeed, it is important to add in closing, that the Monitoring Committee intends not to have to wait for the producing of the Report required by law before publicising updated indicators or newly developed indicators, plus the associated research. Instead small articles will be published as we go along on the Internet. We can mention here that the first of these will be on language and population and is scheduled for the end of autumn.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the plan which we have put forward here, it is clear that, for the moment, the approach taken by the OQLF is to bring up to date a large number of indicators and, indeed, to develop many others to thus arrive at the most complete diagnosis possible of the linguistic situation in Quebec as and when the next Survey is completed. At all events, it is important to mention that we are also mulling over the idea of developing some synthetic indicators. Such a project, however, would take many months if not years, since it would first be necessary to clearly articulate the conceptual elements involved, as well as the underlying methodological problems. In short, despite all the interest that there might be in this project, we see the need for the time to develop such indicators and assure ourselves of their reliability when rendering account as required by law.

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