

IALSS and Francophone minorities in Canada:

Theoretical and historical insights

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This document summarizes the results of a research study conducted on behalf of The Centre for Literacy for its 2013 Summer Institute "Learning from IALS, Preparing for PIAAC". Among other topics, the event focused on the lessons learned from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS).

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This document is abridged from the original full text that can be found at http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/EIACA_franco_Jan 2014.pdf

OBJECTIVES

This research had four objectives:

1. Identify theoretical points of reference that could lead to a better understanding of minority-language groups' relationship to writing, interpreting and using documents, and compare the approach adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with that of member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC)
2. Compare the choice of language made by minority groups to answer the surveys in Europe and in Canada
3. Examine the potential for conducting new analyses based on available Canadian data
4. Provide some reflections for the development of future policies and training programs for adults living in minority-language situations

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Pierre Corbeil, researcher at Statistics Canada, has explored in depth the Canadian component of the 2003 IALSS, particularly in relation to Anglophones living in Quebec and Francophones living in English-majority provinces. His analysis reveals considerable differences in the performance of the two groups in the areas of adult literacy and skills. He suggests that these differences are mainly due to distinct schooling paths chosen by Francophones and Anglophones.

Corbeil's report also examines the proficiency of linguistic minorities in the language they chose to complete IALSS tests. He observes that despite reporting that they had a good level of proficiency in their mother tongue, a majority of Francophones living outside Quebec answered the tests in English. This finding leads to the following questions:

- Is this situation particular to Canada?
- What information does the IALSS shed on this matter?
- And can we shed new light on this choice by revisiting the concepts of *langage* and *langue* that are used in French?



CHOICE OF LANGUAGE FOR TESTS IN EUROPEAN SURVEYS IN MULTILINGUAL ENVIRONMENTS

Very few European countries have several official languages. In Switzerland, the language used in tests matches the language used in specific geographical areas. Apart from a few bilingual cities, literacy tests are conducted in German, French, or Italian, according to the place of residence and not to the mother tongue. In Belgium, languages are also linked to regions, with the exception of Brussels, its bilingual capital. For tests conducted for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the language used is the one used in school. Spain sometimes provides the option of answering in several regional languages, in addition to Castilian.

Luxembourg has three official languages: Luxembourgish, German and French. Luxembourgish is the language of socialization used in kindergarten. German is dominant in the school system. French is taught concurrently and plays a role in selecting the best students. The vast majority of students who answered the PISA tests in German are German-speaking. Those who chose French are mainly French-speaking. Therefore, the choice was based on home language rather than language of instruction. During a complementary test on reading literacy, French-speaking students demonstrated significantly lower results in French compared with the scores of German-speaking students in German. However, the two groups achieved very similar results in their second language.

In conducting the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the United

States gives respondents the option of answering in English or in Spanish.

THE CANADIAN CASE

Even though other countries have similar environments, Canada is in a unique situation. From the outset, it is worth noting that the IALSS background questionnaire is interesting from a sociolinguistic perspective because it allows for a statistical description of language practices among different Canadian populations. Answers to this questionnaire depend on a series of individual representations. For example, what does language represent for the person who answered the questionnaire? What does speaking a language mean to that person? Does language correspond to his or her identity?

A review of IALSS files shows that 12% who reported being Francophones completed the tests in English. That proportion increases to 66% among Francophones living outside Quebec. The choice of language for literacy and skills tests seems to depend more on home language than on the mother tongue. Indeed, while 12% of Francophones chose to take the tests in English, only 6% of those who speak French at home made that choice.

These choices vary widely from one region to another. Further data analysis shows that the proportion of people who use French at home and decided to take the tests in English fluctuates according to their demographic weight in their province of residence. In other words, the fewer their number in the province, the more they opt to take the tests in English.

The same finding applies to the language spoken at home. Provinces that have the lowest percentage of Francophones are those where the largest numbers of Francophones speak English at home. For example, in Western Canadian provinces, 29% of Francophones reported speaking French at home, compared with 70% who speak English.

Another finding worth noting: Among Francophones who reported speaking French at home, more women chose to complete the tests in French, regardless of the educational attainment of women and men.

Finally, 93% of individuals who speak a language other than English or French chose to take the IALSS test in English. Further, 40% of the immigrant population who declared being of French origin and speaking French at home chose to take the test in English. However, this proportion decreases to 29% among 16- to 25-year-olds, likely because they were

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schooled in French. Their elders may be more comfortable in English because it is their language of work.

Although the IALSS background questionnaire is interesting from a sociolinguistic point of view, it still has limitations. For example, the questionnaire provides no information about interviewees' language practices outside their home. This data could have helped refute or confirm interviewees' Francophone identity.

SOME LINGUISTIC OBSERVATIONS TO CLARIFY THE FINDINGS

Although the IALSS survey was conducted in the two standardized official languages in Canada, French and English, it is not certain whether individuals who reported being Francophones speak standardized French. In fact, the language used in tests, the language spoken by an individual, and the language spoken at home reflect different realities. Consequently, we want to define the French terms *langue* and *langage*¹ more precisely, to help clarify the array of meanings and uses to which they are linked and to help explain the language choices of test-takers. This paper addresses the following aspects of natural language: as a negotiated communication tool; its "ecological" evolution; as an identity marker; and, juxtaposed with language and identity, within a complex socio-political and historical context.

Natural language as a negotiated communication tool

In verbal communication, natural language may be called language, parlance, dialect, etc. In French, two different terms identify verbal communication codes: *langage* and *langue*. The term *langage* is increasingly used to identify all articulated verbal communication codes. It even encompasses non-verbal codes, such as Quebec Sign Language.

In communication, natural language is negotiated between parties. In French, the distinction between natural language and language stems from the actors' characteristics and the tools and conditions surrounding this negotiation. Human beings depend on their interactions with others and continually seek to improve their communication through negotiation. The most common communication certainly remains speech. It is based on the needs of the speaking individual and on the

other person's ability to understand. This process involves cooperation and negotiation.

The "ecological" evolution of natural languages

Natural languages are expected to evolve according to the circumstances surrounding communications. Individuals introduce linguistic innovations, retain the most effective ones, and delete those that are no longer useful. Consequently, natural language is more likely to be used as it evolves to adapt to various situations. This process, termed "ecological", probably governs the birth, differentiation, and death of natural language. Individuals have a variety of communication means that allow them to satisfy needs and assert identity. This identity transforms itself according to the individual's personal experience, the general evolution of natural languages around him, and the presence of languages to which he can refer. Natural language contains traces of past negotiations; it is often considered an indication of belonging to a group. It embodies a vision of the world because negotiations were required for the natural language to communicate this vision.

Natural language as an identity marker

Natural language is not the only way to demonstrate identity, but it supports its expression. Natural language is territorially grounded. In other words, it attaches to a geographical area or reflects the attachment of a linguistic community to a territory. For this reason, many countries such as Switzerland and Belgium divide their territories into linguistic zones.

Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between everyday language and the sense of belonging to an ethnic or national group. Natural language being a negotiated instrument of communication and exchange, it evolves and develops within groups, to meet their needs. This dimension of identity can be seen as historical, in that natural language is linked to a group's history.

Natural language, language, and identity within a complex socio-political and historical context

The distinction between *langue* and *langage* is based above all on the status of those who are engaged in communication. When individuals use language as a negotiating tool within a verbal or written communication, we refer to it as "natural language".

¹ In English, language is the only word used for *langue* and *langage*. In this document, the term "natural language" is used to translate *langage*, and "language" is used to translate *langue*.



"Langue" (language) never depends on negotiation or dialogue between speakers. In fact, it is the domain of experts because it relates to an object that was created and structured, a linguistic code subject to study and discussion.

In the context of communication, people who express themselves in a given language generally slip up and push against norms attached to that language. These slip-ups, when voluntary and calculated, may eventually be taken up by specialists and incorporated into the language, based on their capacity to meet the communication needs of other speakers. In this way, languages also evolve, but much more gradually than natural languages do.

Furthermore, innovations produced during the course of exchange only reach linguistic experts when they are widely picked up through multiple negotiations. In a modern media-oriented society, music, films, radio, and television broadly disseminate these innovations. As a result, linguists can take them into consideration more quickly.

Modern states introduce linguistic management policies to ensure that the chosen language remains accessible to the largest number possible. This manifests itself in a standardization of language, the establishment of institutions to regulate it, legislation that defines mandatory employment domains, and measures aimed at protecting it from other languages. Schools become the main channel of transmission for its widespread dissemination.

Language takes on particular importance in transmitting cultural values to children, because it crystallizes a certain vision of the world and communicates other cultural values. Although the normal learning of language occurs within a family, it is increasingly the result of parental choices of the language of schooling, where such options are provided.

A LOOK BACK AT THE IALSS

The distinction between natural language and language can shed new light on results among Francophones living in minority settings who participated in the IALSS in Canada. The survey is based on the comprehension of the written French-Canadian standardized language. However, data collected in background questionnaires relate to the natural language interviewees use in private, according to their own criteria, representations and perhaps self-identity. In this respect, it is worth noting that an individual may define his

natural language as French, simply because in practice, it is closer to standardized French.

However, in the IALSS background questionnaire, statements regarding the mother tongue may not be reliable. For example, in Belarus, more than 80% of respondents report their mother tongue as being Belarusian. Yet, Russian dominates daily exchanges and parents massively enrol their children in schools where the language of instruction is Russian. The Belarusian language is therefore part of their identity and prevents them from being assimilated to their Russian neighbours. However, for a survey such as PIAAC, a majority would probably choose to answer in Russian. This trend would expectedly show up in answers to the IALSS questionnaire. Although intended to be objective, the question on maternal tongue in the background questionnaire may have generated emotional responses, linked to the issue of identity.

As demonstrated in this example, we need to pay careful attention to the consequences of language standardization. In her 1982 study, Isabelle Kreindler explains how the goal of linguistic unification (favoring Russian) impeded the recognition and teaching of indigenous languages. Up until then, repressive measures had conferred an aura of resistance to indigenous languages. Under the pretext of recognizing and teaching these languages, Stalin and his successors standardized them. As a result, their "natural ecological evolution" dwindled. In addition, control measures were introduced in schools to limit their use. In fact, the whole scheme was intended to generate interest in learning Russian (particularly among the elite) by setting up a competition between indigenous languages and Russian, in terms of bibliographical and scientific references, and access to university studies.

Nevertheless, a standardized language that exists within this competitive context can still survive if its speakers rely on legislative measures that protect it from the majority language. Such was the case in former Soviet Union Republics and in France, with regard to the Corsican language. It also seems to be the case in Quebec, where legislation was implemented to that end. Elsewhere in Canada, the situation is more akin to the assimilation of minority-language speakers by speakers of the majority language. However, the presence of Quebec, where it is possible to pursue higher education and high-level employment in French, has slowed the regression of the language or natural languages linked to Canadian French in the rest of the country.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Information collected during the IALSS does not seem to provide answers to the questions surrounding the choice of language for taking tests. The survey offers few details on respondents' linguistic environments and practices. For example, it would have been useful to identify the language spoken by interviewees' partners. Further, some questions might have been added for minority-language individuals touching on their views about the future of their language, or on the language they would like their children to use.

In 1977, a study conducted in Belarus (Lapich, 1998) revealed that one's conception of mother tongue is primarily related to ethnic or cultural identity, much more than to its use within the family. It would be interesting to ask the same type of questions in Canada: "A mother tongue is the language of my nationality." "A mother tongue is the language that created the national culture." "A mother tongue is the language that links me to the future of my country." "A mother tongue is the language in which I am most proficient." "A mother tongue is the language that my family speaks."

It would also be worthwhile to consider administering tests in national languages for individuals who live in minority-language settings, in order to determine their levels of proficiency in these languages. Ideally, one could conduct a sociolinguistic survey among people who declare themselves as Francophones and live in predominantly English-speaking areas.

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