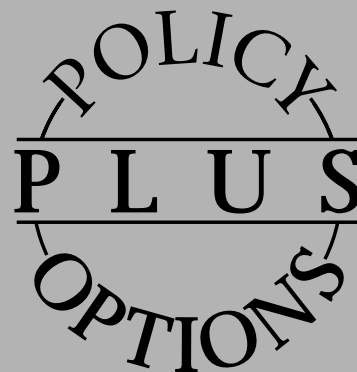


# LANGUAGE MATTERS: ANALYZING THE NEXT ACT ON FEDERAL OFFICIAL LANGUAGE POLICIES



Jack Jedwab

Since the late 1960s, the federal official languages policy has been oriented toward helping official linguistic minorities fend off the threat of language loss. The latest effort to address this persistent problem, the federal Action Plan for Official Languages, was released last year to strengthen linguistic dualism and raise the proportion of high school graduates who have a command of both French and English. But times have changed, says Jack Jedwab of the Association for Canadian Studies, and these goals now seem more elusive than ever. Whereas language issues have been closely linked to identity in the past, this is less and less the case, especially for younger generations. And while Canadians seem to support individual bilingualism, this support is soft, regionally uneven, and does not necessarily translate into support for institutional bilingualism. Moreover, actual knowledge and use of a second language contrasts with opinions expressed in polls, and this suggests that increasing bilingualism levels will not be easy. In fact, concludes Jedwab, whereas language conflicts have traditionally pitted anglophones against francophones, the emerging confrontation might pit those who are bilingual against those who are not.

Depuis la fin des années 1960, la politique fédérale en matière de langues officielles a surtout visé à aider les minorités de langue officielle à se prémunir contre la disparition de leur langue. Adopté l'an dernier pour contrer cette menace persistante, le plan d'action fédéral pour les langues officielles s'est donné pour but de renforcer la dualité linguistique et d'accroître la proportion de diplômés du secondaire maîtrisant à la fois le français et l'anglais. Mais les temps ont changé, note Jack Jedwab, de l'Association d'études canadiennes, et ces objectifs semblent plus inaccessibles que jamais. Si langue et identité ont longtemps été étroitement liés, c'est de moins en moins le cas de nos jours, surtout parmi les jeunes générations. Et si les Canadiens semblent favorables au bilinguisme individuel, il s'agit d'un appui modéré qui varie selon les régions et qui ne se traduit pas nécessairement par un soutien au bilinguisme institutionnel. De plus, les dispositions favorables exprimées dans les sondages concernant cette question contrastent avec la connaissance et l'usage réels d'une langue seconde, ce qui laisse penser qu'il sera difficile d'accroître le niveau de bilinguisme dans la population. Traditionnellement, les conflits linguistiques ont jusqu'ici opposé francophones et anglophones, mais à l'avenir, la confrontation pourrait plutôt opposer les Canadiens bilingues et unilingues, conclut l'auteur.

**T**he release of Statistics Canada's five-year census data on knowledge and use of official languages has often served as a catalyst for impassioned debate over the future of the French language and that of minority language communities. Ironically, the big story of the 2001 data release was that it failed to stir up such emotion. In part this is to be attributed to a widespread sense of fatigue when it

comes to language issues and a feeling that there are several more pressing matters to be tended to by our elected officials. Perhaps more important however is that the figures provided little support for those analysts convinced that the French language is in serious danger on the Island of Montreal. This allowed Quebec's political and intellectual class to insist that language peace had been attained in the

province. Indeed language questions were a non-issue in both the 1998 and 2003 Quebec provincial election campaigns. Once central to the argument for Quebec sovereignty, the situation of the French language is now rarely invoked to justify this objective.

Still it would be premature for federalists to celebrate. Despite the seemingly diminished opportunity to exploit the linguistic insecurities of Quebec francophones, support for sovereignty has not waned as much as anticipated. Language debates will certainly remain an integral part of ongoing and unresolved identity questions within Quebec and to a lesser extent in the rest of Canada. Rates of language loss of francophones outside of Quebec and New Brunswick have yet to be successfully reduced. Indeed the share of mother tongue francophones who have switched to using English in their homes outside of Quebec and New Brunswick continued to rise over the course of the 1990s.

This is why for the past two decades the policy of official languages has been oriented toward helping the official language minorities fend off the threat of language loss by trying to create conditions wherein the communities could live as much as possible in French. One of the principal means to achieve this objective was to give minority language communities control of their institutions. Hence the introduction of the section 23 provision of the 1982 Charter of Rights represented an important step in giving control of French language schools to minority French language communities. It gave rise to a series of successful court challenges that reaffirmed the right to secure French language instruction even in areas with small numbers of francophones.

In 1988 the revision to the *Official Languages Act* called for the enhancement of the vitality of official language minorities. While the word vitality was never clearly defined it signaled that the federal government was willing to augment support to ensure that minority language groups would operate with a relatively strong institution-



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Teaching French in Nova Scotia. In 2001-02, more than 12,000 children of school age were enrolled in French immersion in that province.

al base. Accessible schools, available health care and cultural organizations were deemed essential to curb assimilation of linguistic minorities.

Of course the institutional support extended to minority language communities confronts the broader demographic conditions. Very often such conditions do not make for strong language communities. It is for this reason that language loss amongst francophones remains high in many parts of the country outside of Quebec and New Brunswick.

Taking note of this persistent trend, the 2001 Throne Speech announced that the promotion of Canada's linguistic duality would be a priority of the mandate. The speech included a reiteration of the support for minority official language communities, the intention to expand the influence of the French culture and language throughout the country, and its determination to serve Canadians in both official languages. Shortly thereafter

Prime Minister Chrétien asked Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion to coordinate the Government's official languages policy. Widely seen as the architect of the government's Plan B national unity strategy, Minister Dion's assignment was to work on Plan A through the development of an action plan on official languages. Two years later, in March 2003, the Government of Canada released its much-awaited Action Plan for Official Languages. Entitled "The Next Act: New Momentum for Canada's Linguistic Duality" and otherwise referred to as the Dion plan, it proposed a series of measures aimed at strengthening linguistic duality. The Action Plan is designed to strengthen the vitality of minority official language communities and to ensure that Canada's official languages are better reflected in the culture of the federal public service.

The two principal objectives of the Action Plan seem to be to increase the

proportion of eligible students who attend French-language educational institutions to 80 percent from 68 percent within a decade and to raise the proportion of high school graduates with a command of both of our official languages to 50 percent from 24 percent. A considerable sum will be directed toward attaining these and other objectives which target minority francophones for increasing school enrolment and the country's English-speakers in the rest of Canada for second-language acquisition. (It is worth noting that it has become customary in Quebec to talk about English Canadians as living "in the rest of Canada" and about francophones in the other provinces as living "outside of Quebec.")

Canada has been undergoing a demographic revolution characterized by significant change in the composition of its population. Immigration has been very much on the rise over the past two decades and there has been a sizeable increase in Canada's non-European population. Quebec has attracted the vast majority of French language immigrants. In the rest of Canada, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Urdu are amongst the country's fastest growing languages. Public opinion surveys indicate that, like most Canadians, recent immigrants support the recognition of the historic rights of Canada's francophone population (in fact sometimes more so than do the more rooted segments of the Canadian population). However there is some divergence of opinion as to what these rights might mean in practice.

Whereas racial identity has been the principal marker of identity in the United States, relations between anglophones and francophones has been a defining element of Canada's history. The degree of conflict and cooperation between language communities has very much influenced the stability of the Federation. Outside of Quebec, language conflict was common in the initial formation of nearly all the provinces language conflicts. However, identity issues are increasingly less connected to language. In fact when asked what is

most important to the population's identity, the single largest number of respondents in the rest of Canada says it is their ancestry and ethnic origin (ACS-Environics, March 2003). In Quebec most say language is the principal marker of identity, followed by ancestry and

ethnic origin. Canadians agree that our official languages and bilingualism are an important part of Canadian identity. However that does not translate into support for the idea of Canada as a bi-national or bicultural country. Such concepts have given way to a widely

TABLE 1: WHICH DESCRIPTION OF CANADA BEST REPRESENTS YOUR OWN VIEW? BY LANGUAGE, IMMIGRANT STATUS

	Language at home		Non-British immigrant	
	English	French	Europe	Other
A multicultural country with two official languages	65	48	70	75
A multi-nation federation consisting of three nations, the Québécois nation, the English Canadian nation and the Aboriginal nations	19	29	10	14
A country characterized by two founding peoples	12	17	16	6
All of the above/combo	2	2	-	2
None of the above	2	2	-	1
DK/NA	1	2	4	2

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, September 2002.

TABLE 2: WHICH DESCRIPTION OF CANADA BEST REPRESENTS YOUR OWN VIEW? BY AGE COHORT

	Age			
	18 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 59	60 or more
A multicultural country with two official languages	44	56	37	49
A multi-nation federation consisting of three nations, the Québécois nation, the English-Canadian nation and the Aboriginal nations	36	28	28	18
A country characterized by two founding peoples	16	10	28	24
All of the above/combo	1	3	1	5
None of the above	1	2	4	—
DK/NA	2	1	3	3

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, September 2002.

held vision where official languages persist within a multicultural reality. As revealed below newer Canadians are least disposed to the binational or bicultural model of Canada.

As further revealed there is a generation gap with respect to the concept of Canada as defined by two founding peoples, with the country's younger generation least attracted to this model. It is difficult to determine what if any impact the strength of Quebec nationalism had on the acquisition of French on the part of English-speakers. In future however this will surely not serve as powerful motivation for greater bilingualism.

In many instances federal support for minority language institutions depends on cooperation from the provinces as vital community needs are often within their jurisdiction. Regionally, public opinion needs to be supportive of the aims and objectives of the federal government with regard to minority language communities. In the late 1980s a number of factors seemed to work against such support. In Quebec it has been noted that since 1996 on the basis of mother tongue there are more anglophones than allophones. But the declining share of the francophone population outside of Quebec has prompted the observation that in certain provinces or cities there are groups whose populations exceed those of the francophone community. Of course on the national scale nearly one out of four Canadians are francophones. And in Quebec the allophones consist of many language groups all of which are considerably less in number than the anglophone population. Still there is a strong tendency to emphasize regional demographic realities over national ones.

When those unsympathetic to minority language concerns invoke demographic arguments, those defending their concerns refer to historic realities, pointing out that the French language is a fundamental part of Canada's identity. The historic argument is offered in the Action Plan in the following way:

*[A] country must be faithful to its roots. Linguistic duality is an important aspect of our Canadian heritage. Our history confers upon the Government of Canada the duty to help make our two official languages, English and French, accessible to all Canadians. This dual heritage belongs to all Canadians. The Government of Canada wants to help them fully benefit from it.*

The Action Plan concludes that a nation cannot neglect its origins and history and it is for this reason that services extended to French-speakers are enshrined in the Charter of Rights. Due to this changing regional linguistic composition, the historic argument has often been a tough sell. In part the difficulty is attributable to a lack of empathy in certain quarters for the situation of Canada's language minorities.

Nevertheless, our survey shows that by and large Canadians feel that the federal government should maintain current levels of support for francophones outside and anglophones in Quebec.

Yet there are some noteworthy differences in opinion between Quebec and the rest of Canada when closely examining their respective views on anglophones in Quebec and francophones outside Quebec. While a slight majority of Canadians outside of Quebec favour the status quo with respect to federal support for official language minorities, the remaining respondents are more inclined to call for reduced rather than increased support for francophone minorities outside Quebec. This view differs sharply from the opinion held by Quebecers, most of whom feel that federal support for francophone minorities should be increased and not diminished. As regards Quebec anglophones, more respondents outside of Quebec favoured increasing over decreasing support to them.

Clearly it is the situation of francophones that is at the heart of the action plan. Proposals to address the situation of Quebec anglophones are not ter-

ribly in evidence. In part this has to do with the fact that the community's principal problem has to do with the perception of inequality with francophones and ongoing political uncertainty that has been generated by provincial authorities. Surveys have indicated that access to health services is the main concern of anglophones, something that is a focus of the Action Plan. However the ability to improve such access — which is largely a problem outside of Montreal — is unlikely to put a stop to the significant number of departures of anglophones to what they view as greener pastures.

During the 1990s public opinion surveys in Canada revealed significant levels of support for official

TABLE 3: FRANCOPHONE MINORITIES OUTSIDE QUEBEC

	Canada	Quebec	Outside Quebec
Reduce support	21	6	26
Increase support	22	46	13
Keep at current levels	52	44	54
DK	6	4	7

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, March 2002.

TABLE 4: ANGLOPHONE MINORITY IN QUEBEC

	Canada	Quebec	Outside Quebec
Reduce support	16	18	15
Increase support	25	19	28
Stay the same	52	60	49
DK	7	3	8

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, March 2002.

languages policy and bilingualism. Some three out of four agree that it is important to speak a second language (nine of ten Quebecers think that it is important to learn a second language) and nearly two out of three believe

approved (34 percent of anglophone Canadians disapproved and 12 percent did not respond). Language groups responded in much the same manner when asked whether bilingualism was an asset in which we should invest or a

in this regard. Currently one could do his or her entire schooling without a single class in French in the provinces of Newfoundland, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia (where the majority take French amongst required second languages they can opt for an Asian language).

On a percentage basis the non-Hispanic population in the United States speaks Spanish to a slightly greater extent than Canada's English population speak French as a second language.

that some French language education should be mandatory in English elementary and high schools outside of Quebec (80 percent in the Atlantic Provinces, 70 percent in Ontario and 55 percent in Western Canada).

The initial reaction to the Action Plan confirms these generally favourable trends. Pointing out that the federal government was investing 750 million dollars to promote the use of official languages, Léger Marketing asked whether Canadians were for or against the development of bilingualism across the country. Although some 63 percent expressed their approval there were some noteworthy differences in support along language lines. While 91 percent of francophones agreed with the plan, 65 percent of allophones endorsed it and 54 percent of persons with English as a mother tongue

problem in which we should stop investing? Again approximately one out of three anglophone Canadians felt that it was a problem and in the Prairies and Alberta the population was almost evenly divided on the issue. But perhaps the most relevant question in the Léger poll asked Canadians whether they thought it was possible that, in ten years, half of the 15-24 population might become bilingual. While the majority of Canadians do not believe it possible, there again emerges a distinction according to one's mother tongue. Whereas some 52 percent of francophones and 48 percent of allophones think it possible, only 34 percent of anglophones believe that this goal can be attained. There is also a generational gap on this matter. Youth are more inclined to think higher levels of bilingualism are attainable, while persons over the age of 35 are most unlikely to believe in the possibility (Léger Marketing, March 2003).

The figures on bilingualism outside of Quebec make it difficult to argue that the French language is being forced down anyone's throat. Moreover the idea that Quebec's elite prevents its population from learning English is also not supported by the data from Statistics Canada that reveal

TABLE 5: DO YOU STRONGLY AGREE THAT ENGLISH AND FRENCH SHOULD BE THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF CANADA?

	Canada	Quebec	Outside Quebec
Strongly agree	52	73	45
Somewhat agree	24	19	26
Somewhat disagree	9	4	11
Strongly disagree	14	3	18
DK	1	1	1

Source: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, March 2002.

TABLE 6: PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE THAT CAN TAKE PART IN A CONVERSATION IN A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN THEIR MOTHER TONGUE, 2000-01

Country	Percentage
Luxembourg	97
Netherlands	87
Malta	87
Denmark	85
Sweden	81
Slovenia	71
Belgium	61
Austria	61
Finland	58
Cyprus	58
Germany	53
Czech Republic	48
France	47
EU12/15	47
Italy	46
Greece	44
Estonia	36
Canada	35
Portugal	33
Ireland	33
Poland	33
Latvia	33
Spain	32
Lithuania	33
Slovakia	30
Romania	29
United Kingdom	27
United States	26
East Europe avg.	26
Hungary	25
Bulgaria	20
Turkey	13

Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 1996, Eurobarometer 5, April-May 2001, Gallup, March 26-28, 2001

However, above and over attitudes and opinions, actual knowledge and use of a second language seems to point to rather less positive developments. While supportive of bilingualism outside of Quebec the percentage of the population able to speak both English and French in 2001 was 10.3 percent compared with 10.2 percent five years earlier. Amongst anglophones outside of Quebec between the ages of 15 and 19 the rate of English-French bilingualism dropped from 16.3 percent to 14.7 percent. It is these gaps in behaviour that the Action Plan hopes to address through an investment of significant funds for second language teaching. However, it will be essential to deal with the absence of political will amongst provincial leaders

that knowledge of English and French amongst francophones between the ages of 15 and 19 jumped to 41.5 percent from 35.3 percent from 1996 to 2001. In 2001 the majority of Montreal francophones declared that they were bilingual. Enrolment of francophones in Quebec's English colleges and universities is rising rapidly and now stands at 25 percent of all enrolments. Over that same period, bilingualism amongst Quebec anglophones rose from 61.7 percent to 66.1 percent. The province's allophones are amongst the continent's most trilingual population.

Canada has the advantage of having invested significantly in English- and French-language instruction, an approach that often serves as a springboard for learning a third or fourth language. Canadians are demanding that we further enhance the language skills of the population. The Action Plan states that:

*{W}hen one out of two high school graduates can speak both our official languages, and in fact some of them will master a third or even a fourth language, Canada will be even more open to the world, more competitive and better positioned to ensure its prosperity.*

That goal seems elusive. On the international front bilingualism in Quebec competes with the degree of second and third language knowledge in most European countries. However, outside of New Brunswick it is hard to describe Canada as a bilingual force on the world stage. Indeed on a percentage basis the non-Hispanic population in the United States speaks Spanish to a slightly greater extent than Canada's English population speaks French as a second language. As observed in table 6 bilingualism in Canada is considerably lower than the European average.

The situation of bilingualism in the federal public service seems to

reflect upon the importance attributed to linguistic duality. A study conducted by the Treasury Board in September 2002 confirmed an imbalance in second-language use by anglophones and francophones in the civil service. In Ottawa even if the majority of civil servants in a meeting

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are francophone, very often deliberations take place in English. As the Action Plan observes:

*{T}he fact that there are public servants in bilingual positions who cannot carry out their duties in both languages remains a problem. The time to act is now to avoid compromising obligations regarding language of work, communications with the public and service delivery.*

However, the federal government does not want to give the appearance of looking overly coercive even as it makes good on the threat of letting go senior officials who have failed to master French as a second language. Beyond the civil service the nation's capital has itself not led by example in the area of bilingualism. Between 1996 and 2001 knowledge of French and English dropped amongst the Ottawa population owing to a slight decline in bilingualism amongst the city's mother tongue anglophones. In an important symbolic gesture Ottawa's merged municipal structure failed to adopt bilingual status. High levels of support for individual bilingualism do not always translate into similar degrees of support for institutional bilingualism. It is a distinction that is at the root of the challenge that the federal government faces when it comes to achieving the goals of the Action Plan.

**T**oday the term *linguistic duality* is a euphemism of sorts for providing

greater security for Canada's francophones by increasing the numbers of the country's anglophones who speak the French language and supporting francophone minority language communities outside of Quebec.

Sharp increases in national levels of bilingualism will not be easily

achieved in the short term. While Canadian opinion is favourable to bilingualism, the support seems soft and is uneven across the regions of the country. Much of the thinking behind the Action Plan is inspired by the legacy of the late Pierre Elliot Trudeau and his dream of a bilingual Canada. It thus expresses our collective recognition of Trudeau's contribution via the 1969 *Official Languages Act* and the 1982 Charter of Rights that have brought us closer to the ideal of "a bilingual Canada in which citizens could enjoy and benefit from our rich French and English heritage." Most observers contend that the Trudeau vision was unsuccessful, as it did not sufficiently consider the demographic realities where Quebec was overwhelmingly French-speaking and the rest of Canada English-speaking. Whether the Action Plan works will depend largely on the support that it has from provincial leaders across the country. In 2001 there was even greater polarization as the share of francophone minorities has decreased in the rest of Canada while the percentage of anglophones has fallen in Quebec. Whereas language conflicts have traditionally pit anglophones against francophones, the emerging confrontation might pit those who are bilingual against those who are not.

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