

THE EMERGENCE OF UNILINGUALISM :
ARCHEOLOGY OF THE LANGUAGE
ISSUE IN QUÉBEC

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Dispute about the “relationship between words and things” is said to be the “stuff” of politics¹. The evolution of the language issue in Québec certainly provides striking evidence of this claim, marked as it is by long, hard debate over “words” used in reference to language, i.e. common terms and expressions that imply social and political stakes. Bitter controversy, for example, was fueled in the

1. Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Le partage du sensible*, Paris, La fabrique, 2000, p. 65.

early 1960s by the use of the term *joual* to designate the French language in Québec. But during the Quiet Revolution, a completely contemporary concept emerged – that of unilingualism² – which seemed to be even more fundamental to an assessment of the significance and newness of Québec’s thinking about language. Before politically committed writers claimed *joual*, it was a purist variation on the worn-out theme of the deterioration of the popular language, whereas the idea of unilingualism, which had first appeared in the late

2. There is no official “definition” of Québec unilingualism : as I maintain further on, unilingualism is, first and foremost, an act of language, a means of resistance to bilingualism from within the language, and a slogan loud enough to have some chance of achieving political and ideological success. Thus, if union leader Michel Chartrand is to be believed, unilingualism is a vague, but powerful and effective concept indicating that French must be given priority in Québec : “*Bilingualism* translates *English*”, he said, “*Unilingualism* translates *French*.” (Michel CHARTRAND, cited by Susan PURCELL, “FQF is formed to battle Bill 63”, *The Montreal Star*, October 27th 1969.)

1950s, bore with it the spark of a veritable revolution that was ideological, social and political.

Brandished like a banner during the Quiet Revolution, the idea of unilingualism was called into question at the same time as the great narrative of modern Québec³, of which it formed an important part. Although not necessarily subjected to radical criticism, the idea is no longer espoused today as it was in the past, not even in the qualified form of “anti-nationalistic unilingualism” still advocated by essayist André Belleau in the early 1980s. That such a concept is a thing of the past is, in large part, only natural given the evolution and progress of Québec society. What is less natural, however, is the uneasiness denoted by the general silence about it. Permeating even

3. See Jocelyn LÉTOURNEAU, “Le ‘Québec moderne’ : un chapitre du grand récit collectif des Québécois”, *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 42, n° 5, 1992, p. 765-785. Létourneau belongs to the new generation of historians striving to take some distance from the mythicizing of 1960s Québec.

the research community⁴, this silence is no doubt primarily due to the fact that the “uni” (or “one”) in “unilingualism” goes against the ideas and values embraced by Western societies in this highly modern era⁵.

Yet such uneasiness indicates that we interpret “uni” in light of what it means in France in particular and in Europe as a whole⁶. Repeatedly criticized, the proffering of

4. There are indeed very few works on the specific issue of unilingualism (as distinct from the history, ideology and principles of the language legislation in Québec). It would nonetheless be worthwhile to consult Guy BOUTHILLIER, “Aux origines de la planification linguistique québécoise”, in André MARTIN [ed.], *L'État et la planification linguistique II. Études de cas particuliers*, Québec, Éditeur officiel du Québec, 1981, p. 7-22 ; and Alain COMBRES, “La question linguistique et les partis politiques québécois (1960-1990)”, Ph.D. diss, Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1996.

5. This point is illustrated in a special issue of the journal *Sociolinguistica* published in 1997. The title of the issue was trilingual and represented unilingualism as an ill to be remedied: *Einsprachigkeit ist heilbar/Monolingualism Is Curable/L'unilinguisme est curable*.

6. In fact, the sociolinguistic situation in Québec is very different from that in France : the “uni” in “unilingualism” is

unrestrained and sometimes self-interested interpretations, borrowed and applied without any qualification to America, let alone the minority context of Québec, has no merits in the field of intellectual and cultural history⁷. We must, however, go beyond such declarations of principle. Peculiarities on an epistemological level must be duly considered *in reality* and brought to bear in language itself as in research. “Unilingualism” is a very interesting case in point: the term (“unilinguisme”) is used only in Québec⁸ and does

not used primarily in reference to one unified language (as opposed to varieties of French), but rather to designate the unity and difference of one language in relation to another.

7. There are many examples of research and theories that take specific locations and national histories into account. Take, for instance, the term “intellectuel” (intellectual); a collective work recently published clearly shows very significant differences in the evolution of the term in England, France, Germany and Québec. See Michel LEYMARIE and Jean-François SIRINELLI [eds.], *L'histoire des intellectuels aujourd'hui*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2003.

8. Except in rare situations; it recently appeared in a work by French sociolinguist Henri Boyer, who was careful to

not appear in any of the main French-language dictionaries, except *Le Grand Robert*. However, the synonym “monolinguisme” (“monolingualism”), which has more neutral connotations, is commonly used in France and is listed in the dictionaries. In the final analysis, “unilingualism” designates a concept that is completely specific to the sociopolitical context of Québec. That is why the scope of the concept must be carefully delimited and defined.

“UNILINGUALISM” :

A NEW WORD FOR A NEW POLICY

Despite the very long tradition of thinking about language in Québec, the idea of French

explain why he chose the term : “I use the word *unilingualism* (and not *monolingualism*) because I want to emphasize the result of a process that has tended to impose, most often through symbolic pressure [...], uniqueness on two levels : the *interlinguistic* and the *intralinguistic*.” (Free translation of “Ni concurrence, ni déviance : l'*unilinguisme* français dans ses œuvres”, *Lengas*, vol. 48, 2000, p. 89.)

unilingualism did not emerge until the late 1950s. It was first introduced in 1958 by writer Jacques Ferron during a television appearance that he made while running as a left-wing candidate in the federal election. The idea received wider coverage the following year through Ferron – who revived it during the famous strike by Radio-Canada’s Franco-phone producers – and the first separatist leaders, Raymond Barbeau and André d’Allemagne, who promoted it at that time. In 1961, the Rassemblement pour l’indépendance nationale (RIN), cofounded by d’Allemagne, included the idea in its platform ; given the party’s visibility and success, the idea received credibility which quickly grew in the eyes of the public. The rapid acceptance of the idea raises the question as to why there was a strong need in neo-nationalist circles to forge a concept that was so new in comparison with the traditional positions of French Canada. To answer this question, it is essential to take a look at what, in the texts of the time, enabled

unilingualism to gain favour with Quebecers and what, on an ideological level, gave substance and coherence to such a language planning project.

Careful examination of the gestation of unilingualism has revealed that the concept appeared after decades of bilingualism deemed to be as alienating in Québec as unachievable in the rest of Canada⁹. In this context, unilingualism constituted a rallying signal and the principle behind resistance led from within the language itself. It was the common name of a vision, practice and philosophy of language¹⁰ that challenged the bilingualism

9. Karim LAROSE, "Unilinguisme de l'un, monolinguisme de l'autre : langue et modernité au Québec" to appear in Ginette MICHAUD and Élisabeth NARDOUT-LAFARGE [eds.], *Construction de la modernité au Québec*, Outremont, Lanctôt, 2004, p. 119-135.

10. This philosophy of language could be referred to as "expressivism", as put forward by Charles Taylor. Since I am unable to elaborate here on this point, which is important to thinking about the emergence of unilingualism, I refer the reader to one of my previous works, which deals with the

actively promoted by the federal government, whose commitment to centralization was felt more intensely during the 1950s. Before being reflected almost two decades later in the *Charter of the French Language* (1977), unilingualism offered a place of recognition and of opposition to a language “policy” – a place where, according to Rancière, words shape a view of the world and impose an idea of things. Its appearance, then, had little or nothing to do with the monolingual obsession of large Western nations¹¹.

When the idea of unilingualism was launched by Jacques Ferron, the first discursive context in which it appeared was that of a political electoral battle (led in the name of socialism), followed by that of a union

contribution of this view of language to linguistic thinking in Québec: Karim LAROSE, *La langue de papier. Spéculations linguistiques au Québec (1957-1977)*, Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2004.

11. See Jacques DERRIDA, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre ou La prothèse d'origine*, Paris, Galilée, 1996.

conflict. In fact, the writer discussed his 1958 declaration on unilingualism for the first time in a text published in 1959 on the large-scale institutional struggle in Québec at the time: the strike by Radio-Canada producers¹². Ferron was marked by the strike, as were many other intellectuals of the day, because of the total lack of solidarity the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's English-speaking journalists showed their French-speaking colleagues. The Québec intelligentsia saw the strike as a betrayal of the main left-wing principles the newly-created dynamic corporation, representing the Canada of tomorrow, ordinarily and proudly upheld. They saw it as a sign that these principles worked in the end, i.e. in a time of crisis, along ethnic lines. A large number of intellectuals were compelled to denounce the difference in the treatment and status of Francophones as a distinct group.

12. Jacques FERRON, "Les racists" [*La Revue socialiste*, Spring 1959], *Escarmouches. La longue passe*, vol. 1, Montréal, Leméac, 1975, p. 21.

The primary impetus, then, for the unilingualism project, first formulated by Ferron – and not without with levity, irony and provocation – was profound disillusionment with the foundations of a “modern” Canada that were being laid with disregard for Québec. Historically, Québec had long believed in the merits of Canadian duality, particularly when it came to language. For decades, the most nationalistic Québec journal and one of the oldest, *L'Action nationale*, asked the federal administration and a number of the provincial governments that had prohibited or restricted the teaching of French in public schools, to implement real bilingualism that would do justice to the political project governing the foundation of Canada. For years, the French Canadian elite clamored for real bilingualism wherever numbers warranted, while there was still time. These demands, however, were never followed up with consistent initiatives by the federal government. Even the most liberal English-speaking intellectuals were

reluctant to support the idea of widespread bilingualism in Canada through official policies. This was true, for example, of several English-speaking historians, whose reticence in this regard is clearly shown by Laurence Cros¹³.

There is, in fact, a slightly more complex situation behind the conventional history of unilingualism, often associated with Québec nationalism. On a strictly chronological level, the term was first used to refer to *Anglophones'* knowledge and use of language. Before French-speaking intellectuals called for French unilingualism in Québec, they had expressed their disappointment on many occasions at being subjected to the systematic ignorance of French on the part of Canadian government employees, the English-speaking elite and Montréal merchants. Thus, English unilingualism was at issue, starting in about the

13. Laurence CROS, "Panorama de l'attitude des historiens anglophones canadiens vis-à-vis du bilinguisme", *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies*, n° 45, 1998, p. 15-28.

1940s¹⁴. It was not by chance that the phenomenon, which grew with industrialization, was commented on more and more toward the late 1950s. Journalist Jean-Marc Léger, for example, indicated in 1958 that, given the deterioration of the situation, “English unilingualism would have to be prohibited on everything that reached the public¹⁵.” The question was in no way one of imposing French unilingualism, but rather of preventing the language of the minority from becoming dominant with time.

As of the mid-1950s and during the 1960s, the Québec intelligentsia slowly and then radically abandoned the idea that equitable

14. See ANONYMOUS, “L’antibritannisme de l’unilinguisme” [proceedings of a talk by Charles Holmes titled *The Unbritishness of Unilingualism* criticizing the attitude of English Canadians toward French Canadians], *Le Devoir*, March 12th 1941.

15. Free translation of Jean-Marc LÉGER, “Blocs-notes. Le français, langue seconde au Québec ?” *Le Devoir*, August 7th 1958, p. 4.

bilingualism could be established in Canada. At the same time, it theorized about and implemented the French unilingualism project, created entirely in reaction to political events, to counter adverse unilingualism, which seemed to be guaranteed and masked by an unachievable ideal of bilingualism. The French unilingualism project thus emerged within a very specific ideological framework : at the dawn of the Quiet Revolution, when the dream of a French-speaking community from coast to coast was relinquished, intellectuals tried to outline, in the disorder, new perspectives for narrating the unity and singularity of Québec.

Ideas are rarely thought of in the abstract. More often, they are prompted by the imperatives of news and current events. The idea of unilingualism in Québec is no exception : it grew, first and foremost, out of the binary and divisive nature of bilingualism, i.e. out of a very specific polemical context. That being said, apart from the Canadian political

discourse of the 1950s, there were at least three other ideological stepping stones that literally paved the way for reflection on and the implementation of unilingualism: the advent of neo-nationalist historiography in the 1950s¹⁶, recourse to the principle of territoriality, and the legacy of conservative nationalism.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND NEO-NATIONALISM

The emergence of the concept of unilingualism owes a great deal to new approaches in Québec historiography, particularly those put forward in the 1950s by a group of professors at the Université de Montréal's Institut d'histoire. Seeking to produce a global history that would take into account the unity of

16. It has been asserted that neo-nationalist historiography represented a break with the trends that preceded it; although disputed by some historians, this assertion seems undeniable to me, given the originality of the *critical* approach devised by the École historique de Montréal.

French-Canadian society, academics such as Maurice Séguin, Michel Brunet and Guy Frégault played a major role in the evolution of attitudes toward language in Québec.

These three professors were strongly opposed to the traditionalist conception of French Canada, often colored by conservative, idealistic and somewhat messianic nationalism, and they felt a duty to veer in a new direction. They sought to compile an objective, realistic history that did not create any illusions by embellishing the past and fantasizing about the future. They intended to practice systematic doubt and, by drawing inspiration from the French *École des Annales*, to conceive of human history as an inextricably linked whole. In their view, political, economic and social phenomena had to be considered together¹⁷. They thought

17. Séguin asserts that "civil society or a community is an organism that is 'one', an organism of which the various aspects are integrally related." (Free translation of Maurice SÉGUIN as cited by Jean LAMARRE, *Le devenir de la nation*

it futile and artificial to contemplate only one of the many social forces that determine the evolution of Québec. All forces had to be equally examined, so that society would no longer be defined by its mission, spirit or soul, but rather as a “structure” in its entirety.

These neo-nationalist academics rejected the idea of confining historiographic work on French Canada to religion and culture. In so doing, they opened the door to greater emphasis on politics and economics. Their work differed from that of secular French-Canadian nationalists in tone or stress as well. While the watchword of traditionalist elites had been *survival*, that of neo-nationalists was *life*, full and complete. As a result, it is not difficult to understand why intellectuals in the 1950s reacted so strongly to the claim by well-known linguist, Pierre Daviault, that French was on the way to becoming a “dead language”

québécoise selon Maurice Séguin, Guy Frégault et Michel Brunet (1944-1969), Sillery, Septentrion, 1993, p. 150.)

in Québec. They denied the validity of this claim from the outset, assessed the situation over time, and then tried to remedy the language problem on the basis of priorities defined by the new historiography.

Toward the late 1950s, the influence of the *École historique de Montréal* grew in scope. Many intellectuals, tapping into neo-nationalist ideas, came to believe that, to give French a chance to live on, it was more realistic to concentrate development efforts and constructive measures within Québec territory than to disperse energies in defending a French-speaking community across Canada whose cause seemed increasingly hopeless without significant support from the federal government. This belief by the *École de Montréal* gave Québec symbolic unity and helped facilitate the emergence of the concept of unilingualism; the first advocates of the concept based most of their arguments on neo-nationalist historiography.

They picked up, in particular, on the idea that, to change a situation affected by structural factors, a global view was essential. The idea of a single, all-encompassing vision was very much at work here. They felt that solutions should never be partial, because problems are global. This meant, for example, that the impact on the language, resulting from Québec's integration into the North American economy, could not be countered by organizing conferences on the language issue, speak-well competitions, and francization campaigns in the periodic press or by appealing to people to speak French in the name of some sort of daily heroism. According to these new intellectuals, only political State intervention could withstand such structural factors on a sustainable basis, and ensure that society remain a living principle, a place of action, and not a precarious space of mere survival.

RECOURSE TO THE PRINCIPLE OF NATIONALITIES

Advocates of unilingualism also relied on the principle of nationalities – a fact that provides further insight into the language situation in the late 1950s. The principle first emerged in Europe during the first half of the 19th century. It claims to take into account the natural tendency of people to group together in a nation on the basis of their common history and language. It very quickly became the foundation of a liberation program for a number of oppressed nations (such as the Greeks under the Ottoman Empire). The principle of nationalities prevailed and gained recognition after the First World War when, on U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's initiative, it was used in redesigning the map of Europe. It is based on a very clear ideal of unity and is often summed up by the phrase, *one State, one nation, one language*, which should in theory coincide perfectly.

Inherent in the principle of nationalities is a desire for small nations to avoid domination considered foreign. It was very popular in the 1950s, especially during the African decolonization movement¹⁸, from which Québec intellectuals drew enormous inspiration (the case of Algeria holding their attention, in

18. In fact, this movement refers more to the right of peoples to self-determination : “The nation has served among subordinated groups both as a defensive weapon employed to protect the group against external domination and as a sign of the unity, autonomy, and power of the community. During the period of de-colonialization and after, the nation appeared as the necessary vehicle for political modernization and hence the ineluctable path toward freedom and self-determination.” (Micheal HARDT and Antonio NEGRI, *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 132.) Stéphane PIERRE-CAPS, for his part, discusses the common origin of human rights and peoples’ rights, and the tendency of observers to interpret the right to self-determination as a contemporary reformulation of the principle of nationalities, *Nations et peuples dans les constitutions modernes*, preface by François Borella, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1987, p. 494-496.

particular¹⁹). To give more weight to the idea of unilingualism, its promoters often cited the principle of nationalities²⁰, according to which in definable territories, aggregates of people who speak the same language should have full sovereignty over the territory in which they live in order to avoid relations of domination insofar as possible. The condition for their independence is unity. Thus, the singularity of communities is rooted in lan-

19. See Magali DELEUZE, *L'une et l'autre indépendance (1954-1964). Les médias au Québec et la guerre d'Algérie*, Montréal, Points de fuite, 2001.

20. See in particular Raymond BARBEAU, "Où va le Canada français? L'exercice de la pleine souveraineté est essentiel à l'épanouissement du Québec", an interview by Jean-Marc LÉGER, *Le Devoir*, May 18th 1959; André D'ALLEMAGNE, "Le mythe du bilinguisme", *Laurentie*, n° 106, September 1959, p. 352-353; Jacques FERRON, "Adieu au PSD" [*La Revue socialiste*, Summer 1960], in *Escarmouches. La longue passe*, p. 32; André D'ALLEMAGNE, *Le bilinguisme qui nous tue*, Montréal, Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale, c1962, p. 4; Raymond BARBEAU, *Le Québec bientôt unilingue?*, Montréal, Éditions de l'Homme, 1965, p. 54.

guage²¹. The rationale for the principle tends to suggest that people can have only one language ; this, of course, would have the advantage of making their allegiance easy to identify, but is obviously a simplification of a much more complex situation.

An important nuance must be emphasized here. This principle was mentioned in most texts in Québec as an endorsement and reference on a theoretical level. There was no obsession with unity, since there was generally no question of challenging the existence of the Anglophone minority because it spoke a language different from the majority of the Québec nation which, it was believed, was to constitute a State whose official language

21. For d'Allemagne, "language is one of the main factors in the unity of a nation" and "it is in the context of language that nations are delimited." (Free translation of "Le mythe du bilinguisme", p. 350.) According to Barbeau as well, "language is a vital factor in the political and cultural unity of a nation." (Free translation of *Le Québec bientôt unilingue ?*, p. 19.)

would be French. This nuance explains why neo-nationalist intellectuals focused on the territorial aspect of the language issue and the principle of nationalities. In fact, what was advocated, albeit sometimes in slightly pompous terms, was only a *principle of territoriality* which, in Québec, does not yet have a name. The principle of territoriality, as applied in Belgium and Switzerland for example, provides that a specific language is associated with a distinct territory²². It can be considered a relatively apolitical variant of the principle of nationality since it does not, in itself, imply the constitution of a distinct State.

22. Canada and Québec hold opposing views in this respect, the former favoring the principle of personality (language right stems from individual rights) and the latter, the principle of territoriality (see Luisa DOMENICHELLI, "Comparaison entre les stratégies linguistiques de Belgique et du Canada", *Globe. Revue internationale d'études québécoises*, vol. 2, n° 2, 1999, p. 125-145).

HOMOGENEITY AND RIGHT-WING UNILINGUALISM

The legacy of conservative nationalism, often characterized by an imperative of cultural homogeneity, also contributed, in its own way, to paving the way for the emergence of the idea of unilingualism. One of the very first separatists, Raymond Barbeau, was influenced by a long tradition of right-wing thinking, according to which “a religious melting pot [...] [was] as unacceptable as a cultural and language blend²³.” This marginal fraction of the intelligentsia, of which Barbeau was the best-known representative, upheld a cultural notion of nation rather than a civic one – which was not unusual at the time²⁴ – except

23. Free translation of *J'ai choisi l'indépendance*, Montréal, Éditions de l'Homme, 1961, p. 8.

24. Recent works on the idea of nation make it clear why care must be taken not to confuse the *cultural* notion of nation (based on the history of a community) with the *ethno-genealogical* one (based on strong organicism, rooted in the law of the blood, for example). It is also important not to be

that it was defined as entirely *one* and “culturally homogeneous²⁵.” The heritage of a long

fooled by the convenient opposition of cultural nation and civic nation ; many theorists have shown the limitations and imprecision of this opposition for more than a decade. The works of Pierre Caussat, Marc Crépon and Anne-Marie Thiesse are revealing in this regard.

25. “The proponents of the Canadian ‘nation’ have a geographic conception of nation ; they forget that a nation must be culturally homogeneous, that spiritual and moral values cannot withstand vagueness and permanent concession.” (Free translation of *ibid.*, p. 8.) The singularity of Barbeau’s ethno-nationalism is even clearer when it is compared with that of the RIN and André d’Allemagne. For the RIN, “a nation is essentially a historic and cultural community”, but is “pluralistic with its ethnic, social, political and religious components, which unite in a common culture where new contributions must assimilate.” (Free translation of the *RIN program*, adopted in October 1962 ; cited by André D’ALLEMAGNE, *Le RIN de 1960 à 1963. Étude d’un groupe de pression au Québec*, preface by Marcel Rioux, Montréal, L’Étincelle, 1974, p. 41.) Although a form of unity or pooling is necessary, it does not preclude pluralism. D’Allemagne chose to overlook “ethnic nationalism” based on blood and race, but believed that a nation cannot exist without a form of unity. “A product of history”, culture has the federating function of the “mould” in which the various “collective activities” of a people combine ; such culture is continuously being built, as

inward-looking past, this position was toned down, even by the most radical, as the 1960s wore on. Yet it suggests how unilingualism, based on a concern for social justice by most, could be exploited from an ethnocentric perspective by some. Thus the importance of paying careful attention to the details, nuances, history and spirit of such a concept.

Raymond Barbeau, for his part, maintained essentially the same definition of nation throughout the years, i.e. "homogeneity of ethnicity, language, religion, history and traditions, exclusive possession of a territory, collective will to live, in a word, complete national unity²⁶." While the "ethnic" aspect does not indicate any racism here, it certainly implies a collective sharing of experiences and

the history of a nation is an ongoing, never-ending process (André D'ALLEMAGNE, *Le colonialisme au Québec*, Montréal, Éditions R-B, 1966, p. 79 and 111.)

26. Free translation of Raymond BARBEAU, "M. Raymond Barbeau" [response to a survey on nationalism], *Tradition et progrès*, vol. 2, n° 2, December 1958-March 1959, p. 12.

values that tends to exclude anyone wishing to be integrated into the nation. Barbeau emphasized unity and cohesion much more than reception and integration. He was not xenophobic, but rather totally indifferent to the need to consider contact with others in terms of hospitality. In this type of discourse, homogeneity must be seen as one of the features of unity. As one of the principles of right-wing nationalism, it occasionally served as a basis for reflecting on the language.

Representing the conservative fraction of thinking about unilingualism, the intellectuals who used the term *homogeneity* infused it with an ideal of a collective identity obsessed with boundaries and borders : they saw “unilingualism as the normal and natural condition of a unified people²⁷.” This attitude, however, was not predominant among

27. Free translation of Raymond BARBEAU, “En marge de la Commission Laurendeau-Dunton. L'imposture du bilinguisme et la nécessité de l'unilinguisme”, *Revue annuelle de la Société du Bon Parler français*, May 1964, p. 14.

advocates of unilingualism ; on the contrary, it was maintained only by Raymond Barbeau, his circle and certain marginal right-wing publications with limited distribution.

FROM UNILINGUALISM TO THE *CHARTER OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE*

Although the unilingualism project – formulated in different ways in recent decades²⁸ – has marked the history of thinking about language in Québec, it may not offer the best key to understanding the issues involved in the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101). Unilingualism was certainly a catalyst for the rejection of veiled bilingualism, thus

28. Before Bill 101 was passed, there were at least four variants of the unilingualism project : 1. that of the first sovereignists, still sketchy (1958-1965) ; 2. that of the RIN, which was developed in particular when the organization became a political party (1965-1968) ; 3. that of the Parti québécois, more moderate (1968-1977) ; 4. that of Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste and its network. Each of these variants evolved and was marked by specific refusals and priorities.

enabling Québec intellectuals to start thinking about practical solutions to the language problems in Québec. Many of these solutions, although not all, were modified and used in the different language laws adopted, but the idea of “uni” or “one”, which had served within and through the language to galvanize energies around the *word* “unilingualism” at the beginning of the 1960s, was no longer necessary and fell by the wayside. Thus, despite certain ambiguities, Bill 101 cannot in any way be defined by the will to impose French and eliminate language diversity in Québec like the language homogenization process implemented in France beginning in the 18th century. This undoubtedly is the main reason the word “unilingualism”, considered too radical, disappeared for all intents and purposes from contemporary thinking about language in Québec.

Practically speaking, the *Charter of the French Language* has one objective : to enable the French-speaking majority to “live in their

language²⁹.” *To live* must be interpreted in the fullest sense of the word. *To live* means to work, to express oneself, to communicate without language being a daily, exhausting and humiliating struggle. All the different Québec political parties, from the Liberal Party to the Union nationale, have agreed on this point, differing only in their perceptions of what *to live* means on a social level. For the separatists, this was a crucial issue that had to be taken seriously. Not only did they have a very noble idea of what every speaker should be entitled to in terms of language, but they wanted to put that ideal into practice. By basing themselves on a sociolinguistic analysis of the situation, they believed that, for French to be a living language, it had to be clearly

29. Michel PLOURDE, “La Charte de la langue française du Québec”, *La langue française au Québec. Conférences et allocutions (1980-1985)*, Conseil de la langue française, Éditeur officiel du Québec, 1985, p. 18-19.

defined as the “common language”³⁰ of Quebecers and there was no room for any ambiguity in that respect.

If there is a logic to the “one” in Bill 101, it is to be found in the qualifier “common” or “as one”, i.e. in a vision of the language as common property that would bring all of Québec society together. To take this logic farther, for French to assert itself as the language shared by all Quebecers, the commitment for it had to be written into legislation, since nothing on an economic level would enable it to live on as a natural given. It was thus necessary to give French clear priority and to reject the principle of official bilingualism. This does not prevent, it must be repeated, the two languages from coexisting in reality or

30. Camille LAURIN, “Allocution prononcée devant le Canadian Club de Montréal” [1977], *Le français, langue du Québec*, Éditions du Jour, 1977, p. 30. See also Camille LAURIN, “Québec bilingue ou Québec français” [1992], *Une traversée du Québec*, preface by Jacques Parizeau, Montréal, L’Hexagone, 1999, p. 91.

institutional bilingualism from being alive and well (but that is not the question). Such a rejection of official bilingualism has symbolic significance that strengthens the position of French without threatening that of English (which is thriving with a language community of more than 300 million speakers and does not need official recognition or protection to survive and live on).

Since defending the equality of the languages in Québec served to perpetuate the supremacy of English, the issue was not one of making the second language disappear, but rather of ensuring that the language of the minority ceased to dominate the sociolinguistic arena at the expense of that of the majority. The father of the *Charter of the French Language*, Camille Laurin, claimed consistently that the bill enacted by his party was in the spirit of the white paper on culture, which had been prepared by a Parti québécois opponent, Pierre Laporte, a Liberal Party

minister, who was already promoting the “priority” of the French language in 1965³¹.

As journalist Graham Fraser observed, “bilingualism – which gave official and equal status to French and English, thus diminishing the symbolic importance of French and giving English recognition as a common language for non-francophones – was to be explicitly rejected³².” This meant that a number of measures with real social impact had to be adopted. Accordingly, the *Charter* declares that French is not only the official language, but also the language of the State, education, work and business in Québec. In line with the Liberal Party on this point as well, the *Charter* aimed

31. Camille LAURIN, “Allocution devant l’Association des manufacturiers canadiens” [1977], *Le français, langue du Québec*, p. 49. This commitment by the Liberal Party was reaffirmed during the 1966 election. In 1968, Union nationale leader Daniel Johnson also stated that French should have the same status as English in Ontario and thus become the prevailing language in Québec.

32. Graham FRASER, *P.Q. : René Lévesque and the Parti québécois in Power*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1984, p. 100.

to ensure that French would *effectively* become the first language in Québec.

Journalist Jacques Keable best expressed the language balance that Québec was seeking to achieve and that Bill 101 has tried to implement. He anticipated that the report by the Gendron Commission of Inquiry on the Position of the French Language in Québec, when tabled in 1972, would recommend that

French [be], if not the only legal language, the only mandatory language in virtually all communication other than personal in Québec. As a result, English [...] [would] lose its equal status and assume the fairer position of non-mandatory second language, while maintaining its legal value³³.

This passage is interesting in that it puts the Québec language problem in the proper perspective and reverses the way in which it has all too often had to be broached.

33. December 26th 1971, p. 4.

In light of the evolution of thinking about language in Québec, it indeed seems erroneous to attribute unilingualism to the *Charter of the French Language*. In the *Charter*, what is important, once again, is not the idea of unity, but the will for communication to be in French, the language of the majority, and for French to be at the heart of social life in Québec. Nothing more, nothing less. French could not develop if it continued to be swallowed up by English, the dominant language in North America, which imposed itself as a result of its socioeconomic prestige. By picking up on the ideas that grew out of the unilingualism project and rejecting any exclusivist approach, the *Charter of the French Language*, changes this state of affairs by reaffirming, in the name of language expressivism intended to give speakers back their full dignity, that French must remain a *living* language and that, for it to do so, it must become the *common* language, *first* language and therefore the *official* language in all the main areas of life in society.