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Résumé de l'article

This paper examines how Canada's Official Languages Act (OLA) reinforces the socio-political constructs of language barriers and linguistic borders. Questions addressed are: in Canada, who do linguistic borders serve, how do linguistic borders function, and what are the effects of linguistic borders? The theoretical framework draws from raciolinguistics and border imperialism. The method, a socio-diagnostic critique, juxtaposes the discursive practices of the OLA with border governance strategies. Results highlight how linguistic border governance creates the conditions for language-based discrimination to thrive. The paper concludes with a call to disinvest from the OLA, and a turning toward the water-language connection.

Canada's Official Languages Act, Border Imperialism, and the Surface Tension of Water

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Abstract

This paper examines how Canada's Official Languages Act (OLA) reinforces the socio-political constructs of language barriers and linguistic borders. Questions addressed are: in Canada, who do linguistic borders serve, how do linguistic borders function, and what are the effects of linguistic borders? The theoretical framework draws from raciolinguistics and border imperialism. The method, a socio-diagnostic critique, juxtaposes the discursive practices of the OLA with border governance strategies. Results highlight how linguistic border governance creates the conditions for language-based discrimination to thrive. The paper concludes with a call to disinvest from the OLA, and a turning toward the water-language connection.

Keywords: linguistic borders, language policy, raciolinguistics, language-based discrimination, critical race theory

Introduction: Language Barriers in Canada

Between 2023 and 2028, the federal Government of Canada (2023, p. 139) will invest $3.8 billion to promote bilingualism throughout the nation. One goal of this funding is to increase people's competencies in the two official languages by bolstering second-language instruction (Canadian Heritage, 2022, p. 29). Increased funding for language instruction could lead to breaking down language barriers between people with different linguistic backgrounds. The federal government claims that the official languages unite Canadians, so investing in French and English will contribute to making Canada a more equitable and inclusive place (Government of Canada, 2023, p. 138). However, a commitment "to strengthen the vitality of official languages across Canada" (Government of Canada, 2023, p. 138) is not the same as improving communication across languages. Strengthening two languages alone is unlikely to increase equity and inclusivity in a multilingual country. I argue that Canada's investment in the *Official Languages Act* (OLA; Minister of Justice, 2024) reinforces language barriers.

A language barrier is defined as a difficulty in or "absence of communication between people who speak different languages" (Collins, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Language barriers are considered a normal part of life in a multilingual world. In Canada, language barriers are frequently blamed for routine problems, such as: (a) injuries at work (e.g., Premji et al., 2021), (b) films not being produced (e.g., Glasner, 2018), (c) academic research not being published (e.g., St-Onge et al., 2021), (d) inadequate health care (e.g., Bowen, 2001; CMAJ, 2018), (e) decreased commercial competitiveness (e.g., Sauter, 2012), and (f) international students' struggles in class (e.g., Ge & Durst, 2022). A common thread is the focus on the language barrier as the issue rather than on the socio-political constructs that created the barrier.

There are many conceptualizations of language barriers. A Google image search of

"language barrier" presents a variety of visual representations. Images with squiggly lines, question marks, Xs and random letters between speakers demonstrate different ways of thinking, confusion, and an inability to communicate. In many images, the language barrier appears to be a physical barrier that is practically insurmountable – like a giant blockade, a chasm, or a looming brick wall (Frederick Interpreting, 2020, para. 1; see Figure 1). Like many of the Google search results, the illustration of the brick wall equates language barriers with physical borders. A language barrier can then be viewed as a type of border: a linguistic border that separates people.

Figure 1. Brick wall as language barrier

In this paper, I seek to denaturalize the socio-political construct of the linguistic border. I start from the position that linguistic borders can be deconstructed just like any other border, and I analyze Canada's OLA through the lens of border imperialism (Walia, 2021). I provide historical context surrounding the development of the OLA as well as share current OLA updates, which highlight the systemic racism at the core of the OLA. In the discussion and conclusion, I offer some thoughts on disinvesting from colonial institutions that claim to enact justice while maintaining systemic oppression (Stein, 2021).

Historical Context: Systemic Racism and the Establishment of Borders

Linguistic borders in Canada cannot be discussed without considering systemic racism. In 1969, the OLA legally established Canada as a bilingual country – declaring English and French as the official languages (Canadian Heritage, 2021c). Regulations in the OLA led to the establishment of heavily funded institutions and programs, such as the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, which still exist today and continue to evolve (Hudon, 2023). According to Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (RCBB; 1963), which informed the creation of the OLA (Haque, 2019), Canada's official languages are the languages of the country's "'two founding races,' namely Canadians of British and French origin" (p. xxvi). Defending their choice of words, the authors of the report state that their usage of "race" refers to national origin "and carries no biological significance" (RCBB, 1963, p. xxii). This explanation reveals the internalized racism of the report writers and the systemic racism in Canada's

foundation. Anti-racism scholars and activists have long understood that race is not a biological category. Rather, race ideology "was from its inception, and is today, about who should have access to privilege, power, status and wealth, and who should not" (Smedley, 1997, p. 50), which is demonstrated in the RCBB (1963) report. For example, the authors state: "in our view the reference to the two 'founding races' or 'peoples who founded Confederation' is an allusion to the undisputed role played by Canadians of French and British origin in 1867, and long before Confederation" (RCBB, 1963, p. xxii). Describing the undisputed importance of the French and British "races" while insisting that race is not a factor implies a neutrality to the Whiteness of the original French and British colonists, and positions White as the unstated default. The default is a position of power because it represents normality (Ewing, 2020).

In the report, "Other ethnic groups" are placed in an inferior position whereby their ability to participate in Canadian society depends on the French and English groups' willingness to "accept" and "allow" them (RCBB, 1963, p. xxv). The report suggests that other ethnic groups contribute *to* Canada rather than being an integral part *of* Canada. The list of mother tongues other than French or English is dominated by those of European origin, with a complete erasure of Asian or African languages (RCBB, 1963, p. 26). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples and languages are purposely excluded from the commission's findings: "the Commission will not examine the question of the Indians and the Eskimos. Our terms of reference contain no allusion to Canada's native populations" (p. xxvi). Thus, in Canada, the languages of the English and French colonists cannot be separated from their privileged White settler status (Sterzuk, 2015). When official documents like the RCBB (1963) declare these colonial notions as facts, subsequent enactments (e.g., the actions of the Commissioner of Official Languages) uphold them, and imaginary borders such as those between French and English Canadians, "other ethnic groups," and Indigenous peoples become reified through people's lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework: Raciolinguistics and Border Imperialism

This critique is positioned within the multidisciplinary field of raciolinguistics, which identifies the relationship between race, language, and power (Alim et al., 2016). Linguicism places languages and language varieties in a hierarchy "and serves as a legal and subtle way of discriminating against people" who speak language varieties that are not the dominant language (Song et al., 2021, pp. 50-51). Racism and linguicism intersect when so-called low-status language usage or perceived linguistic deficiency are conflated with racialized people (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Raciolinguistics provides a framework for analyzing these ideologies, which are inherent in the OLA.

Racism is also a factor in border imperialism. Border imperialism is an analytic framework that Walia (2014) created to demarcate how nation-state borders produce and maintain the "violences and precarities" imposed on migrants (p. 8). To understand linguistic borders, it is necessary to understand the purpose of borders: "borders are not fixed lines or passive objects simply demarcating territory; borders are productive regimes both generated by and reproducing racialized social relations, further imbued by gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nationality" (Walia, 2021, p. 78). Thus, borders are socio-political constructs that are mobilized by people in and with power. While Walia (2014, 2021) refers to nation-state borders, her analytic framework is also helpful in understanding how discursive bordering practices operate.

Given that linguistic borders exist in Canada and the government is heavily invested in maintaining the vitality of two official languages, my research questions are: in Canada, (1) who do linguistic borders serve, (2) how do linguistic borders function, and (3) what are the effects of linguistic borders? These questions are addressed through a socio-diagnostic critique of Canada's OLA (Minister of Justice, 2022; 2024).

Socio-diagnostic critique is a method within the field of critical discourse studies (CDS). A key understanding within CDS is that social structures and discourses[1] produce and reproduce each other: "rather than merely representing social reality, discourse(s) actually (re)create social worlds and relations" (Flowerdew & Richards, 2017, p. 2). Discourse, then, is ever-present, and its ubiquity renders the ideologies it conveys so common that they become unnoticeable. The aim of CDS is to denaturalize unexamined ideologies in order to support the struggle against injustice. According to Martínez Guillem (2017), CDS has been particularly fruitful in the study of how racist ideologies are (re)produced through discursive institutional practices.

Socio-diagnostic critique "draws on social theory and contextual knowledge in order to point out the 'manipulative character' of some discursive practices" (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, as cited in Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017, p. 5; see also Martínez Guillem, 2017). To conduct my socio-diagnostic critique, I juxtaposed OLA discourse to four border governance strategies that are integral to the creation and maintenance of border imperialism: *exclusion*, *territorial diffusion*, *commodified inclusion*, and *discursive control* (Walia, 2021; emphasis added). My process was more fluid than systematic. I began by reading the OLA (Minister of Justice, 2022) and the RCBB (1963) report. I then turned to documents produced by the Office of the Commissioner of the Official Languages (2021; 2022; 2023). As I read, I kept the border governance strategies in mind, which would spark questions that inspired me to search for ways the OLA is enacted. One limitation of my process is that I did not keep a formal research record of how I came to each document or the total number of documents I read. However, one strength of my critique is that I moved beyond documents explicitly created for or about the OLA and considered ways that the OLA appears in other political discourse, which provided a snapshot of the OLA's extensive reach. The 14 documents that are presented in this report are organized in Table 1 according to their explicit or implicit connection to the OLA.

Table 1
Documents included in this report of the socio-diagnostic critique of the OLA (Minister of Justice, 2022)

Institution, Year	Document Title	Explicit OLA Connection	Implicit OLA Connection
Canadian Heritage, 2021	An Act that Serves All Canadians	✔	

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[1] Discourse refers to real-world communication via semiotic systems, including spoken language, written text, and visual and aural signs (Flowerdew & Richards, 2017).

Institution, Year	Document Title	Explicit OLA Connection	Implicit OLA Connection
Canadian Heritage, 2022	2022 Cross-Canada Official Languages Consultations: Report on Consultations	✓	
Minister of Justice, 2022	Official Languages Act / Loi sur les langues officielles	✓	
Minister of Official Languages, 2022	Bill C-13 441 An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, to enact the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and to make related amendments to other Acts	✓	
Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2021	Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada	✓	
Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2022	Portal for Public Servants	✓	
Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2023	Storytelling	✓	
Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism	Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism	✓	
Treasury Board of Canada, 2019	Inclusive Official Languages Regulations	✓	
Canadian Heritage, 2021	Indigenous Languages Act		✓
Government of Canada, 2019	Building on Success: International Education Strategy (2019-2024)		✓

Institution, Year	Document Title	Explicit OLA Connection	Implicit OLA Connection
Government of Canada, 2023	Budget 2023		✓
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020	Francophone Immigration – Express Entry		✓
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020	Temporary Resident to Permanent Resident Pathway		✓

Findings: Official Languages Act and Border Governance Strategies

This report is organized by the four border governance strategies: exclusion, commodified inclusion, territorial diffusion, and discursive control (Walia, 2021). Through a raciolinguistics lens, my analysis highlights how the OLA acts as a bordering regime that creates and maintains language barriers to uphold social hierarchies.

Exclusion

Exclusion is the first border governance strategy that creates the setting for all other bordering strategies to succeed (Walia, 2021). The purpose of exclusion is "to contain and expel" (Walia, 2021, p. 79), creating a hierarchy of those within and those without. In Canada, the OLA (Minister for Justice, 2022) contains English and French within a haven, providing regulations, funding, and a commissioner to protect and ensure equal status of these languages:

2 The purpose of this Act is to

> **(a)** *ensure respect for English and French* as the official languages of Canada and *ensure equality of status and equal rights and privileges* as to their use in all federal institutions, in particular with respect to their use in parliamentary proceedings, in legislative and other instruments, in the administration of justice, in communicating with or providing services to the public and in carrying out the work of federal institutions;
>
> **(b)** support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities and *generally advance the equality of status and use of the English and French languages within Canadian society*; and
>
> **(c)** *set out the powers, duties and functions of federal institutions with respect to the official languages of Canada.* (pp. 2-3; emphasis added)

While English and French are safely contained and protected by federal institutions, "other languages" are not. The OLA does nod to the rights of other languages– "nothing in this Act shall be interpreted in a manner that is inconsistent with the preservation and enhancement of languages other than English or French" (Minister for Justice, 2022, p. 35). However, compared to the extensive backing by multiple federal agencies for French and English (e.g., the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages; Canadian Heritage; Minister of Official Languages; the Treasury Board; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada), there is very little support for other languages (Packer & Balan, 2023). The very label "other" places any language that is not

French or English in an inferior position.

Canada is a multilingual country with more than 140 immigrant languages (Galante, 2021). At least 90 languages are indigenous to the land Canada claims (Canadian Heritage, 2019). With such linguistic diversity, privileging two languages in a sea of hundreds is an exclusionary tactic. This exclusion delegitimizes plurilingual speakers (Galante, 2021), especially those who do not hold White settler English or French status. Galante (2021), who moved to Canada from Brazil, states:

> Despite having Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Italian in my repertoire, I have never been considered bilingual in Canada because I do not speak French perfectly yet. The popular discourse of being bilingual here places value on the two official languages only, and even if you speak both languages, you need to sound like a native speaker or you will have your bilingual identity stripped away from you. (para. 1)

Another example of delegitimizing speakers occurs in Canadian educational institutions where international students experience language-based discrimination (Martin, 2022; Tavares, 2021). Language-based discrimination is the unjust treatment of people whose language differs from that of the dominant societal norm (Altidor, 2020; Ng, 2007) and includes humiliation, derision, and exclusion (Martin, 2022). Despite high proficiency in the dominant language, international students are othered; this is exemplified by Tavares's (2021) description of one student's experience:

> In the multicultural community of [a Canadian university], it was common to hear many 'accented' forms of English. However, in Patricia's experience, the 'native' accent was still privileged, thus working to distinguish (native speaker) Canadians from everybody else. Initially, Patricia stayed primarily with other multilingual international students, wherein non-native proficiency played a major and positive role of mediating inclusion. Yet, she still felt excluded from the 'real' (i.e. native-speaking and local-student-based) community. (p. 13)

The majority of international students in Canada are recruited from Asia (Buckner et al., 2023). A significant commonality among this heterogeneous group is that they become racialized in Canada. Racialization is undergirded by language ideology (Kubota et al., 2023). In a society that positions White founding races as official, one result is that "the visual image of a speaker's race triggers listeners' positive or negative perceptions of the speaker's linguistic competence" (Kubota et al., 2023, p. 760). Racialized international students are assumed to be deficient official language speakers, and people are often surprised when their English or French is "good enough" (Kubota et al., 2023, p. 774).

This othering is reinforced by the imaginary ideal of what official language speakers look like. While I have not found race-based information about official language teachers on the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages website, the site does provide a document that highlights the photographs of 10 French and English teachers in Canada. I took a screenshot of each of the photos and amalgamated them so they could be seen side-by-side (see Figure 2). Although a person's racial identity cannot be accurately judged from a photo, when I look at these photos, I am struck by a seeming lack of racial diversity. This public display of White-presenting official language teachers further positions the racialized international student as outside of the official language-speaking border.
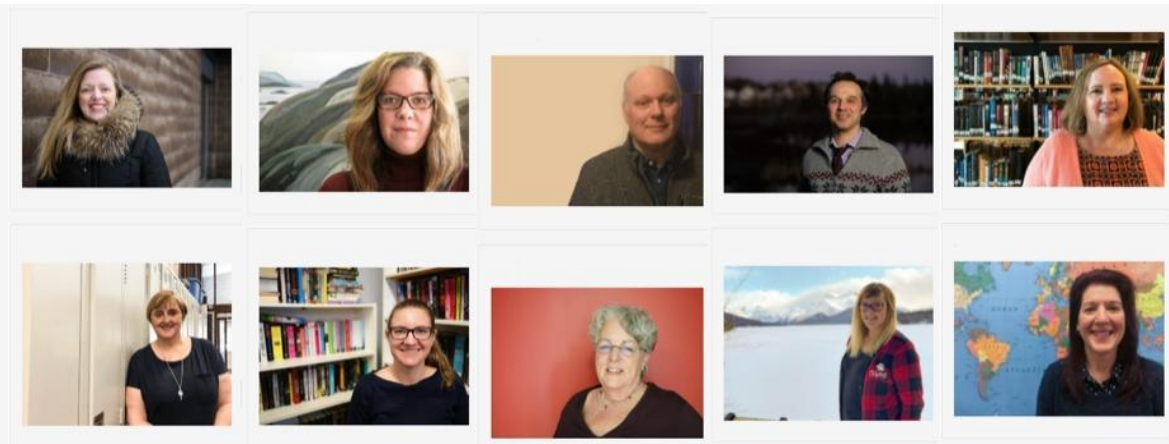
Figure 2. A visual representation of Canadian official-language teachers, as shared by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2023)
Note. These images are adapted from *Storytelling: Second language teachers (2020)* by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2023). The purpose of this amalgamation is not to ascertain or comment on the race of individual teachers, but to demonstrate the connection between Whiteness and official languages, as portrayed by Canada's official institutions.

In the cases presented above, the language barrier is a border that contains native speakers and expels non-native speakers. This border is strengthened and maintained by the OLA (Minister for Justice, 2022) as it actively supports the advancement of French and English to the detriment of other languages and their speakers. Borders demarcate the in-group and out-group of the nation-state, "emphasizing difference and separation from those deemed undesirable" (Walia, 2021, p. 80). Thus, language barriers facilitate the border governance strategy of exclusion, perpetuating the imagined superiority of the so-called founding races of Canada.

Territorial Diffusion
Territorial diffusion is the "internalization and externalization of border enforcement" (Walia, 2021, p. 84) whereby bordering practices can occur within and beyond the nation-state borders. Language-bordering practices within Canada are most striking in regions where English or French is not the mother tongue for most of the population. For example, 75% of the Inuit population (approximately 63% of the total population) in Nunavut speak Inuktitut as their first language (CMAJ, 2018; Government of Nunavut, 2016). However, following the OLA (Minister for Justice, 2022), Government of Canada offices, regardless of location, must ensure that their work environments "are conducive to" and can "accommodate" both French and English (p. 15). There is no requirement to use other languages, such as Inuktitut. The new Indigenous Languages Act (2019) accommodates Indigenous languages in federal institutions, but the wording is not as prescriptive as in the OLA for French and English:

> A federal institution or its agent or mandatary *may* […] provide access to services in an Indigenous language, *if* the institution or its agent or mandatary has the capacity to do so and there is sufficient demand for access to those services in that language. (p. 7; emphasis added)

In 2017, there were 23 bilingual federal government offices in Nunavut (i.e., both French and English were spoken), and 53 unilingual offices (i.e., only one official language was spoken (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2019). This is a clear example that the OLA does not attend

to the linguistic reality of the people on the land Canada claims.

Internationally, 219 Canadian offices are required to offer services in the two official languages (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2019). There are several reasons for the externalization of the OLA. First, it ensures that Canadian citizens abroad can be served in either official language (Minister for Justice, 2022). Second, it supports the government's plan to actively recruit Francophone immigrants to populate French communities outside of Québec, where the number of mother-tongue French speakers is decreasing (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020; Miller, 2022). Third, it "enhances the [bilingual] image that Canada projects around the world to those who wish to live, study or do business here" (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2019, para. 42). Figure 3 is a map presented by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2019) to demonstrate that the 3,867 federal offices, both nationally and internationally, were designated as bilingual – meaning they used both official languages, not just one.
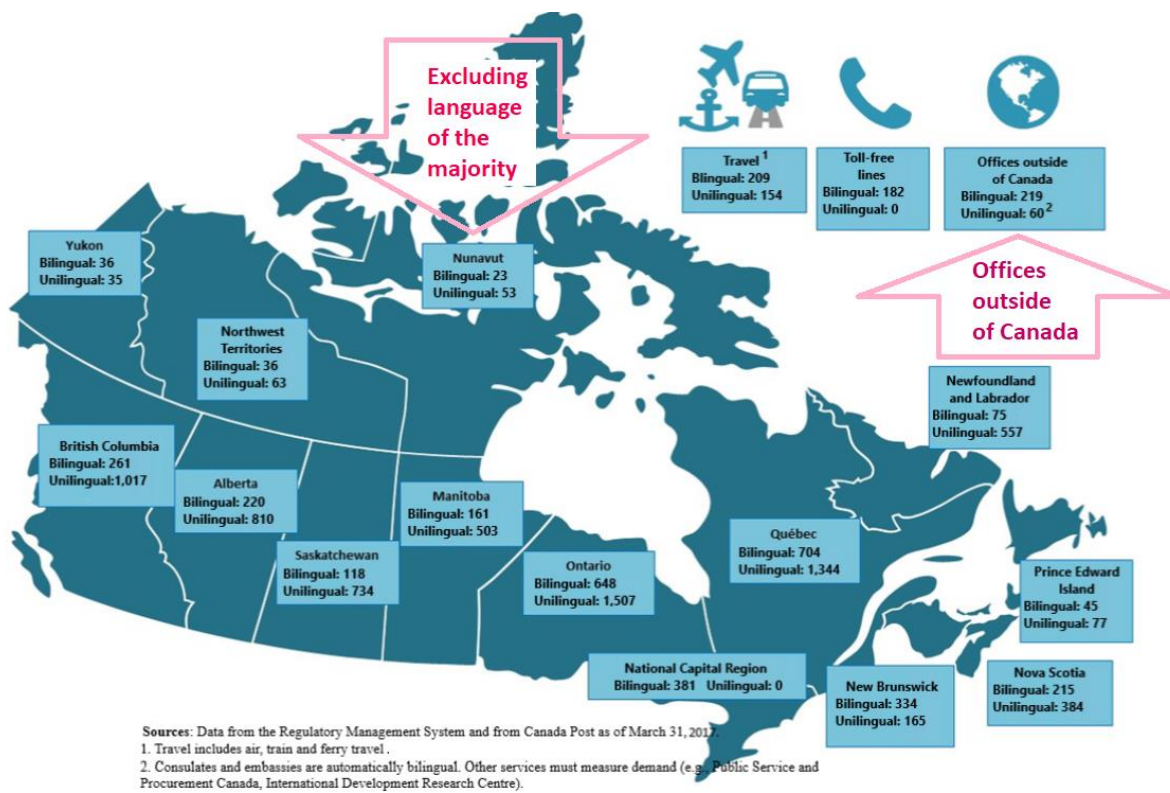

Figure 3. A visual representation of Language designations of federal office and points of service, as shared by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2019)
Note. Image adapted from *Language designations of federal offices and points of service* by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2019); territorial diffusion is indicated, with pink arrows and text added for emphasis.

By maintaining internal language barriers and externally projecting its linguistic values, Canada's border imperialism solidifies its international status as a White settler nation.

Commodified Inclusion

Commodified inclusion is a border governance strategy that recruits "othered" bodies for their contribution to the economy without providing the security afforded to citizens (Walia, 2021, p. 85). For example, the Government of Canada recruits international students, primarily from India and China (Buckner et al., 2023; Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022), with the promise of excellent programs in English and French (Government of Canada, 2019) and a streamed pathway to permanent residency post-graduation. One requirement to transition from temporary student status to permanent residency is language proficiency in English or French (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2021). International students contribute upwards of $20 billion annually to the Canadian economy (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). Since the government first implemented its international education strategy in 2010, the number of international students has steadily increased, but the percentage who transition to permanent resident status has decreased (Sharma, 2020). The reasons international students choose to leave are complex, but one factor is Canada's unwelcoming cultural climate, which includes racism and language-based discrimination (e.g., Martin, 2022; Netierman et al., 2022). Thus, Canada's language-bordering practices contribute to the extraction of funds from racialized international students while excluding their long-term presence.

Discursive Control

Discursive control relates to the ways in which categories and distinctions are created for the purpose of managing, dividing, and controlling people (Walia, 2021, p. 87). The OLA's discursive ordering developed from Eurocentric and colonial epistemology and perpetuates binary thinking. For example, the descriptor "official" demarcates French and English as having "approval or authorization" (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Since only French and English can be official by Canadian law, any other language becomes unofficial, thereby lacking approval or authorization. This leads to the creation of the problematic bilingual/monolingual binary. As noted previously, a person who speaks both French and English is officially bilingual and holds superior status to a person who speaks English and Mandarin, who is officially monolingual. Furthermore, these categories are premised on native-speakerism whereby fluency means sounding like (Galante, 2021), and, by extension, looking like (Kubota et al., 2023), a member of one of the "founding races" (RCBB, 1963, p.173). As a result, people with varying degrees of proficiency or "othered" accents can become hesitant to communicate.

Discussing language-based discrimination, an international student at a Canadian university explains: "If you are in a class and trying to talk, and people look at you weird, would you have the courage to talk?" (Martin, 2019, p. 9). The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2021) recognizes this linguistic insecurity and has responded by creating language learning resources and tools for parents, youth, teachers, managers, and employees. For example, employees who feel insecure about their French can download a special background for Microsoft TEAMS meetings to let people know that they do not sound like a native speaker because they are still learning: "Je m'exerce à parler français. I'm practicing my French" (see Figure 4; Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2022).
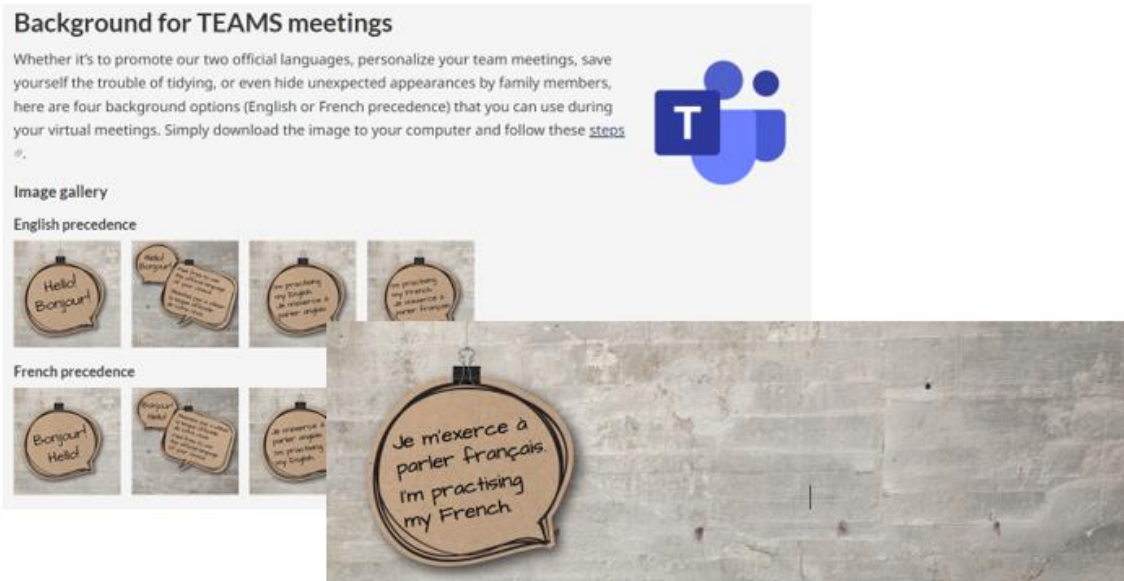
Figure 4. Reproduction of tool intended to ease linguistic insecurity
Note: Adapted from *Best Practices: Teams Backgrounds* by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2022).

This discursive maneuver reinforces native-speakerism by indicating that a non-native French speaker is merely practicing rather than communicating. Further, it does not account for language-based discrimination that is less about proficiency and more about intersecting oppressions such as racism, while placing the onus of fixing the problems caused by the bordering practices on the people who are negatively affected by said practices.

Another example of discursive control stems from the racist, colonial notion of the "Indian problem" (Ontario Métis Family Records Center; OMFRC, 2017) that attributes deficit characteristics to Indigenous people to mask the crimes of the colonizers. Such discourse is blatant in the RCBB's (1963) report. The authors use phrases like "complex problems" (p. xxvi) when explaining why they will not include Indigenous languages or cultures as they consider language policy for Canada. The authors suggest that Indigenous peoples need "help [to] preserve their cultural heritage" (p. xxvii) – as if Indigenous languages and cultures were not being exterminated in residential schools and other violent colonial practices while the report was being written (Khawaja, 2021; OMFRC, 2017). Most telling, though, is how the authors situate Indigenous languages as primitive and stagnant with "insurmountable handicaps" while positioning French as a superior language that must be protected by law (p. xxxv). Arguing for the protection of French, the RCBB (1963) authors explain that "a great cultural language like French" should not suffer the fate of the "Indian dialects" (p. xxxv). There is a direct relationship between the discursive hierarchy of languages in the RCBB's (1963) report and the OLA that aims to protect languages of the French and English "but does not include […] any Indian band, band council or other body established to perform a governmental function in relation to an Indian band or other group of aboriginal people" (Minister for Justice, 2024, p. 7). While French-speaking minority groups have been and are threatened by English hegemony, finding protection through a racist bordering strategy does not alter the hegemony.

Border Governance Gridlock

The four border governance strategies employ different methods for creating and maintaining language barriers. Ironically, the definitional boundaries of each strategy are permeable, and each method typically supports more than one strategy. It is not difficult to find overlaps from the cases presented above. For example, the categories of bilingual and monolingual on the territorial diffusion map above are also examples of exclusion for plurilingual people. The labels monolingual and bilingual also function within discursive control. The tools to ease linguistic insecurity are an example of discursive control, but since they can also be used in offices outside of Canada, they support territorial diffusion. The racist, deficit language used to describe Indigenous peoples is upheld through discursive control, which leads to exclusion. These overlaps between border governance strategies create a gridlock of regulations and actions that are not easily undone. Manifestations of the four border governance strategies are so common and overbearing that it is difficult to imagine a way forward without borders.

Answering the Research Questions: The Purpose of Language Barriers in Canada

During the civil rights movements of the 1960s, there was an "increasing concern at the federal level with issues of national unity" (Haque, 2019, p. 237). The Canadian government employed the RCBB and instituted the OLA as an act of "deliberative democratic processes" (Haque, 2019, p. 237) to demonstrate attention to public concerns. The terms of reference of the RCBB were never democratic, though, as they set from the start to "develop the Canadian confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races" (RCBB, 1963, p.173).

It is not surprising, then, that this socio-diagnostic critique highlights the connections between nation-state power and the maintenance of the socio-political hierarchy. The answers to the research questions are: (1) linguistic borders in Canada serve the Canadian state, which was founded on settler colonialism through the disenfranchisement and attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples; (2) the function of linguistic borders is to protect the privileged status of the "founding races" of Canada; and (3) the effects of maintaining linguistic borders are insecurity, exclusion, and the attempted erasure of all other languages and cultures, especially those that are indigenous to this land.

New Updates to the Status Quo

In June 2023, a new bill to "modernize" the OLA came into effect (Minister of Official Languages, 2023). The focus of the amendments is to better support the French language, particularly in French communities under threat of English hegemony outside of Québec. There are also additional updates concerning Indigenous languages:

> AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the importance of <u>maintaining</u> and enhancing the use of languages other than English and French <u>and reclaiming, revitalizing and strengthening Indigenous languages</u> while strengthening the status and use of the official languages. (Minister of Official Languages, 2023, p. 3; emphasis in original to denote amendment)

However, the intent of the *Act* remains unchanged: the fortification of border governance strategies to ensure that both French and English maintain their privileged status.

The addition of "reclaiming, revitalizing and strengthening" is a discursive maneuver that acknowledges the newly instituted *Indigenous Languages Act*, which came into effect in 2019 (Canadian Heritage, 2021b). The main benefit to the Government of Canada of the *Indigenous*

Languages Act is its increased social and political capital on the world stage as it publicly announces its response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) *Calls to Action* and its adherence to the United Nations (2007) *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. However, Canada's intentions are apparent in the numbers. The 2023 budget to protect the two official languages is over $1 billion (Government of Canada, 2023), while the 2023 annual budget for the revitalization of multiple Indigenous languages is $115.7 million (Canadian Heritage, 2021b). As long as the government maintains the colonial OLA, any other language rights will always be under threat. Any gains to Indigenous language revitalization and reclamation, whether or not they are funded by the *Indigenous Languages Act*, are a result of the attention, care, and work of Indigenous activists and communities (e.g., NEȽOLṈEW̱, n.d.). For the Canadian government, implementing the *Indigenous Languages Act* while simultaneously strengthening the OLA is an example of commodified inclusion and discursive control.

The Need to Disinvest

When the Canadian government describes the OLA as "An Act that Serves all Canadians" (Canadian Heritage, 2021a), it ignores the multilingual reality of this land, so the only way it can enforce its official bilingualism is through a bordering regime. I argue that the OLA cannot be fixed because it is doing exactly what it set out to do—strengthen the vitality of the languages of the colonizers. Instead of trying to fix or update the OLA, I recommend we let it go. In her analysis of abolitionist and decolonial critique of higher education, Stein (2021) concludes, "rather than repair existing institutions in order to improve, preserve, or restore them, we will ultimately need to disinvest from their harmful promises so that other possible futures might emerge" (Stein, 2021, p. 397). Stein explains that disinvestment will ultimately be the result of many complicated and contradictory practices over a long period of time. She suggests that disinvestment includes "unlearning and undoing violent ideologies, desires, and infrastructures, and (re)learning how to be together in the world differently" (Stein, 2021, p. 397). While Stein (2021) focuses on the field of higher education, I suggest the sentiment applies to all colonial institutions, including the OLA.

Pausing, Unlearning, Relearning

In her book on decolonial research, Patel (2016) suggests that the first step to disinvestment (what she calls "eradicating, dismantling, and obliterating colonialism"; p. 88) is *to pause*. A pause may seem counter-intuitive in the face of border governance gridlock and the overwhelming task of countering the racist, colonial nation-state status quo while new laws are born to strengthen it. Yet, to disinvest from the OLA, a pause is required. Patel (2016) explains that the purpose of the pause is to provide distance from the issue in order to gain perspective on what practices must be stopped. The pause prevents turning to immediate (ineffective) solutions that can only exist by reaching for what is already known or has already been done. A pause allows space for learning and requires letting go. As Patel (2016) explains, "learning that holds tightly to what is presently known is to want the safety of assimilation, and sacrifices the much messier desire of transformation" (p. 95). Because the pause requires letting go, there can be no prescription for what to do while pausing – for how to unlearn and relearn. As a White settler Canadian, I have much un/learning to do. What follows are some possibilities that I am considering while I attempt to pause.

Reconceptualizing Linguistic Borders – From Solid to Fluid

I am inspired by scholars and activists who are rethinking and reclaiming/revitalizing how people understand what languages are (e.g., Li, 2018; McIvor, 2020). Languages are commonly thought of as discrete, bound entities as if contained within borders. For example, it is easy to recognize the differences between English and French, so it is not a far leap to view them (or their speakers) as uniquely distinct. Holding a bordered view of languages contributes to acceptance of bordered language practices like the OLA. However, Li (2018) explains that languages are "socially constructed systems" (p. 25) that have more similarities than differences. The neural networks in the human brain that process language are also involved with non-linguistic functions and cognitive processes (Li, 2018). Language, then, is neither bound socially nor physically. Translanguaging refers to how "people fluidly use their linguistic resources—without regard to named language categories—to make meaning and communicate" (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 2). According to Li (2018), translanguaging:

> moves *beyond* languages, i.e., transcending. In so doing, it challenges the conventional understanding of language boundaries between the culturally and politically labelled languages (e.g., English, Chinese). With its emphasis on meaning making and knowledge construction, it also challenges the boundaries between language and other cognitive systems as separately encapsulated systems or modules. (pp. 24-25)

Translanguaging alone cannot fix systemic problems. Like race, another socially and politically constructed concept, language has a profound impact on lived experiences, and the fact remains that people feel and experience the socio-political divides between languages. Therefore, during this pause, a question I am considering is one posed by Li (2018): "how can we protect the identity and integrity of individual languages while recognizing and promoting the fluidity of linguistic diversity and contact between languages?" (p. 22).

Regarding fluidity, McIvor (2020), an Indigenous language revitalization scholar and a learner/speaker of her own ancestral language, explains that many Indigenous epistemologies acknowledge the connection between language and land. Mother tongue came from Mother Nature. This is where I want to pause. What can be learned about transcending linguistic borders while protecting the integrity of language(s) when we understand that language and earth are connected? Most of the earth's surface is water (Williams, 2014); since language comes from earth and is fluid, language must have properties of water.

This new-to-me knowledge about the connection between water and language motivated me to engage with water in ways I had not since I was a child. I started playing with water, splashing drops of water on my desk to notice its properties. Thinking about borders as I played, I began to notice a similarity between language and water. Languages do not have fixed borders but are recognizable as distinct. Similarly, water does not have borders, but individual drops are recognizable as distinct. Water has a flexible quality called surface tension wherein hydrogen bonds form, break, and reform depending on the surrounding conditions (Breslyn, 2020; LEARN PHYSICS, 2021). These loose hydrogen bonds create a bit of tension on the surface of the water, making the drop appear to be a distinct entity. The beauty of surface tension is how it shifts when two water drops come near each other: the bonds reform so the drops can join, creating a new shape that still retains some of the uniqueness of the original shapes (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Water drops reforming
Note. In the left-hand picture, water has been dropped onto a table. In the right-hand picture, more water has been dropped in the same area. Inside the blue circle of the right-hand picture, an original drop has reformed to connect with a new drop, yet both drops retain much of their original shape.

Like water atoms, language speakers change how they act with each other according to their environment. As they come closer together, the language users (i.e., atoms) create new bonds that can be formed, broken, and reformed. The boundaries between them are transformed. On a larger scale, these bonds combine to make up language(s), just as water drops constitute bodies of water.

Conclusion

The water-language connection is more than an analogy. Li (2018) says, "no single nation or community can claim the sole ownership, authority and responsibility for any particular language, and no individual can claim to know an entire language, rather bits of many different languages" (p. 22). This sentence would still be true if we replaced "language" with "body of water". Water and language flow across nation-state borders, in and out of communities. This similarity is indicative of the significant connection between water and language. It is a grounding, earthly connection. This is where I pause. The pause does not equate to inaction (Patel, 2016). Rather, it means that while I strive to unlearn and contribute to collective learning that can lead to transformation, I must determine what tools and logics I may still be holding on to that appear to be emancipatory but instead function to maintain colonialism (Patel, 2016). I might question, for example, if CDS and socio-diagnostic critiques like this one can contribute to social change. I must ask if and/or how engaging in these discourses, even from a critical perspective, contributes to colonialism or forecloses different ways of being.

Analyzing the OLA through the lens of linguistic border imperialism and raciolinguistics has, however, highlighted the systemic racism and ongoing colonial practices that are foundational

to the OLA. Canada's colonialism is centuries-old, and quick fixes risk reinforcing entrenched colonial habits. Disinvesting from the OLA requires pausing (Patel, 2016; Stein, 2021), and "those who accept this invitation to pause might find that it enables them to ask previously unthinkable questions […] without immediately demanding answers" (Stein, 2021, p. 390). Pausing can take many forms, and I have now identified my own previously unthinkable question. In what ways can prioritizing the water-language connection contribute to disinvesting from colonial institutions like the OLA?

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