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RETHINKING THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE AND NATION-BUILDING: HYPOTHESES FROM 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Preliminary results of a major research project focussed on census enumerations suggest the need to rethink the ways in which scholars have analysed questions of language and identity in the making of modern Canada. These results point to a profound transformation in attitudes, assumptions and experience that was related to a changing international context.

The point of departure for this paper is what may be considered a surprising question: how did language of expression become a key dynamic in the construction of identity in Canada? This question appears surprising since the topic of language is often assumed to have always been at the heart of the Canadian distinctiveness. Has not a central drama of Canadian history involved the complex ways in which Francophones and Anglophones have perceived each other and interacted at least since the 18th century?

While considerable evidence can, indeed, be presented to emphasize the importance of language throughout the political, social, economic and cultural dimensions of Canadian history, it remains puzzling that only in the later 20th century did formal legislation define language as a cornerstone of identity in Canada. In the British North America Act, for example, very little is said about language of expression; in fact, more is said about religion. It was one hundred years later that political debate focused on language as a key component, most notably in the federal Official Languages Act of 1969.

The need to explain the changing role of language in the construction of identity in Canada first came to my attention during research on the language-of-instruction controversy in late 19th century Ontario when legislative changes moved toward an English-only policy.[1] At that time, I focused on the question of language as a way to explore how an understanding of the lives of "ordinary" individuals and families could enhance our analyses of the so-called major events of history. First conceptualised in the era of the "new social history" during the 1970s, this study used the language controversy as an illustration of what was generally considered the central theme of Canadian history, the relations between British-origin and French-origin populations. Was it sufficient to study these relations by examining the thoughts and behaviour of political, religious, economic and social leaders? Or could the new social history's attention to the "anonymous" contribute better interpretations of key features of Canadian history?

The language-of-instruction controversy in Ontario had already been thoroughly examined at the level of provincial and federal politics, as well as Catholic Church leadership. Previous studies had shown that, beginning in 1883, the Ontario government increasingly gave in to Opposition demands that French be eliminated as a language of instruction in the Ontario school system. The increasing elimination of French-language instruction after the mid-1880s occurred despite the fact that it had been accepted for decades in keeping with the arrival of French-language settlers, especially in the province's easternmost counties such as Prescott and Russell. My research probed the extent to which the perspectives and actions of famous leaders were interrelated with those of the historically anonymous,

the largely rural individuals and families whose children were at the heart of the controversy but who did not appear in any previous study.

My research results revealed that, at least in this case, the histories of the famous and the anonymous were closely intertwined, but in quite unexpected ways. The language of instruction controversy in Ontario certainly involved elite ambitions and actions but, more importantly, also reflected complex social, cultural, economic, demographic, and political changes that resonated across rural townships and villages as well as urban centres. In the context of these changes, the question of language became a question of personal and collective identity in unprecedented ways, both officially and unofficially. The result was that schools became a battleground for parents, teachers, trustees, school inspectors, and parish priests as well as politicians and bishops. More language controversies followed the Ontario experience of 1880s including those in Manitoba and New Brunswick. While the details of these various controversies reflected the differences of their settings, their general trajectory was similar; English increasingly became the *de facto* official language in Canada outside Quebec in the decades after Confederation.

In researching the Ontario experience, I noticed but did not fully appreciate what I now think is a fundamental feature of the changing relationship between language and identity in Canada. Specifically, I am now convinced that, in order to understand attitudes, events, and policies in Canada, we need to situate them in a rapidly changing international context involving both scientific debate and government action, especially in Great Britain, the United States, and other European countries. This international context attracted my attention as a member of the Canadian Families Project that created an individual-level database of the 1901 Canadian census as way to probe key features of the making of modern Canada. For my contribution to this effort, I began examining the three language questions that were included for the first time in this enumeration: "Can speak French"; "Can speak English"; "Mother tongue (if still spoken)."

My initial research focused on trying to understand why no language questions were included in previous census enumerations and why they were introduced in 1901. Their absence seemed truly puzzling in light of how important the census had become over the course of Canadian history. Building on a tradition of enumeration begun in the mid-17th century, the census became a regular feature of colonial governments with an increasing number of questions touching diverse aspects of everyday life during the earlier nineteenth century. Its formal role in deciding population distributions for electoral purposes was confirmed in the British North America Act that extended the practice of conducting an enumeration every ten years. By the later 19th century, hundreds of questions were asked in each enumeration including those dealing with each individual's birthplace, religion, marital status, and occupation. Among all the questions, none dealt with language.

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As I was attempting to understand the absence of language questions on the Canadian census as well as their introduction in 1901, I became equally puzzled by the fact that the only studies of actual language patterns before the later 20th century were the largely-forgotten efforts undertaken years ago by analysts at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics. Despite the availability of published reports after each enumeration as well as some special in-depth tabulations, my bibliographic search in 1998 did not reveal a single research article dealing with the language questions posed in censuses between 1901 and 1951. The importance of language in Canadian history before the mid-20th century seems to be simply taken for granted by historians. Indeed, the standard histories of Canada do not offer more than a mention of the language-of-instruction controversies and few even remark on the only well-known features of Canada's language history before Confederation, that of the British acceptance of the use of French in 1774 and the short-lived imposition of English in the creation of the Province of Canada. Despite the absence of research, these histories of Canada have been characteristically written in terms of two linguistic communities (variously labelled depending on the period of their writing) until recent decades when more scholarly attention began to be paid to aboriginal peoples and minority-language groups.

My research effort is now part of the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure project that is building on the Canadian Families Project by constructing databases of census enumerations for the 1911-1951 years as well as of related documentary and newspapers sources. Our goal is to enable interpretations of the making of modern Canada in terms of the changing patterns of social, demographic, cultural, economic and political thought and behaviour across the country and in an international context thanks to our partnership with others, especially colleagues at the Minnesota Population Center and fellow members of the North Atlantic Population Project.[2] While research on the language questions is still at an early stage, the results thus far suggest a series of hypotheses that not only appear to help explain the introduction of language questions into the 1901 census but also other key features of the international context of nation-building in Canada.

My current hypotheses have emerged from initial efforts to build a made-in-Canada explanation for the history of the language questions on the Canadian census. In 1901, the three questions were positioned on the enumeration form next to the well-established questions on school attendance under the heading "Education and Language". In keeping with this positioning, the census

officials explained that the focus of the questions was on the learning of languages. Two groups were particularly targeted, those immigrants who were "foreign elements" and those residents of Canada who were "citizens of French origin."[3] Census officials explained that, "In a country peopled with so many foreign elements as Canada, it is desirable to know if they are being absorbed and unified, as may appear by their acquirement of one or the other of the official languages. And as English is now in a very large degree the language of commerce throughout the world, it is also desirable to ascertain to what extent citizens of French origin are able to speak it in addition to their own."

For its part, the mother tongue question was designed to help identify the "race" to which individuals belonged. By examining the emerging field of linguistics during the late 19th century, I discovered that the expression "mother tongue" was not used at this time in the sense of the first language learned by an individual, but rather in a more collective sense. The census officials defined mother tongue as "one's native language, the language of his race; but not necessarily the language in which he thinks, or which he speaks most fluently, or uses chiefly in conversation. Whatever it may be, whether English, French, Gaelic, Irish, German, Swedish, Russian or any other, it should be entered by name in column 33 if the person speaks the language, but not otherwise." The specification that if an individual did not speak "the language of his race," it should not be listed as his or her "mother tongue" emphasized the focus of the language questions on "absorption" and "unity" especially as indicated by the learning of English, which was not only an official language but also the "language of commerce."

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In this way, the 1901 census reflected the changing role that language was seen to be playing in nation-building. The census officials described the ability to speak a particular language as a good indicator of processes of cultural integration as well as of the potential for economic participation. In the case of Canada, the ability to speak French or English was connected to their roles as official languages, while the ability to speak English was linked to its perceived international role in commerce.

At the same time, however, the census evidence both from 1901 and later enumerations makes clear that the introduction and continued inclusion of language questions in the Canadian census occurred in a complex and changing international context. After the mid-19th century and increasingly during the 20th century, language questions slowly became a common feature of census enumerations around the world. In 1851, the census in Ireland first asked about the ability of residents to speak Irish and English. Similar questions about Gaelic followed in the 1881 census in Scotland. Language questions were introduced in the United States in the 1890 census that asked for the first time about the ability to speak English. Documentary and newspaper evidence suggests that politicians, census officials and journalists in Canada were well aware of developments elsewhere, and both the rationales and formulations of the language questions on the Canadian census were clearly related to the changing international discussions about the meaning of language. In this sense, the history of language in Canada requires more than a made-in-Canada explanation.[4]

Taken together, the research results thus far suggest that at the heart of the Canadian experience is a fundamental transformation in the presuppositions about language and thus in the focus of debate about questions of identity and policy. In stylized terms, this transformation now appears to have included eight interrelated changes in official and unofficial perspectives about language between the later nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

1) As a characteristic of individual and collective identity, the question of language moved from being a moderately important issue in Canada at Confederation to one of unparalleled preeminence in public debate by the time of the Centennial celebrations. Until well into the 20th century, identity was not primarily defined politically, socially or culturally in terms of which language was used; rather, language was generally seen as epiphenomenal, that is arising out of other attributes. By the mid-20th century, however, mother tongue had come to be seen (especially in government circles and statistical agencies but elsewhere as well) as the key characteristic by which individual and therefore group identity could be determined. In this way, Canada came to be seen as composed of linguistic communities defined in the new vocabulary of Anglophones, Francophones and Allophones. No one had thought about Canadian society in this way in 1867.
2) Along with the increasing importance attributed to language was a revised rationale for its importance. Throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, the rationale used in public debate focussed on two concerns: national unity and economic progress. However, the relative importance of these two concerns shifted significantly over the years. In the decades after Confederation, both concerns were emphasized to a roughly similar extent by politicians and journalists. By the mid-20th century, however, the relationship of language to economic progress was subsumed within a much greater preoccupation with its role in determining national unity.
3) In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, government officials and other leaders portrayed language as a way of measuring the progress of assimilation into a desired homogenous society. By the mid-20th century, in contrast, language had begun to be seen as the key index of movement toward a bilingual and multicultural Canada.
4) The central concern of the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries was on the extent to which English was being used across Canadian society whether or not

other languages (including French) were also spoken or understood. During this period, "progress" was seen in terms of the proportion of Canadians able to speak English. In later decades, however, the most important political question involved use of the French language. In this context, "progress" was defined in terms of the proportion of officially bilingual, English-mother-tongue residents and the continued viability of French-language communities both within and outside Quebec.

5) In the initial debates in late 19th century Canada, the language question was seen to be relevant to specific groups within Canada (particularly those who could not use English such as settlers who had moved from Quebec to easternmost Ontario). In contrast, the debates of the mid-20th century assumed that language was a key concern for all residents in Canada (whether or not they could use English). In this sense, the question of language became a Canada-wide policy issue with implications for individuals and groups in all provinces and territories.
6) One constant feature of the language debate since Confederation has been a concern with immigrants. However, the nature of this concern has changed dramatically. Throughout the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries, the key question in this debate was the extent to which immigrants were learning English. Subsequently, the focus shifted almost completely to a concern about the learning of French by immigrants to Canada.
7) For those born in Canada, the question of language in the decades after Confederation characteristically focused on the learning of English by those who spoke French. In contrast, this question came to be posed by the mid-20th century almost exclusively in terms of the learning of French by those who spoke English or of the continued use of French by those seen as having French as a mother tongue.
8) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the question of language came to be posed in a new paradigm of multiple identities during the closing decades of the 20th century. Earlier, this question had been addressed in a context within which individuals and groups were defined in terms of singular identities, mutually exclusive categories that assumed that each person had one and only one identity. The language questions were added in the 1901 census as a way to specify "origin" more clearly. In recent decades, these questions have become seen as part of a constellation of markers that do not simplify individual identity but rather indicate the extent of its multiplicity. Accordingly, an insistence on one and only one response for each census question has been replaced in recent enumerations by an acceptance of multiple answers.

Taken together, these hypotheses make more understandable the brief mention of language in the BNA Act and the absence of language questions in the census before 1901 as well as the royal commissions, legislative changes, and new policies on language that characterize the second half of the 20th century. In the same way, the trajectory and timing of the apparent transformation in the ways in which language was viewed in Canada corresponds well with recent developments outside Canada including, for example, the passing of the Welsh Language Act in 1967 and Ireland's first Official Languages Act in 2003. At the same time, it is clear that much more research is needed to understand the meaning of language during the course of Canadian history. In order to understand the transformation of attitudes and assumptions, we need to situate this transformation in the context of changing language use among both the "famous" and "anonymous." For 20th century Canada, the language questions and responses in census enumerations offer one way of probing the complex and changing character of the interrelationships of language policy and practice.[5] Based on the current hypotheses, it seems unlikely that future national histories will continue to examine Canada's past in the static and mutually-exclusive terms of Anglophones, Francophones and Allophones.

Who are you? Who am I? Who are we? The current hypotheses about 19th and 20th century Canada suggest that how we address these questions will continue to include considerations of language but in ways that reflect an unprecedented appreciation of individual complexity and diversity. The developing paradigm of multiple identities suggests that definitions of identity based primarily on a single language will only have limited use as we move forward in the 21st century. While debate about identity in recent decades has tended to focus on Canada's collective complexity and diversity, it is the increasing recognition of individual multiple identities that may increasingly affect the meaning of geo-political boundaries. ■

NOTES

1 Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-language controversy in Ontario,* Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987.

2 For further information about these projects, consult www.canada.uottawa.ca/ccri.

3 Chad Gaffield, "Linearity, Nonlinearity, and the Competing Constructions of Social Hierarchy in Early Twentieth-Century Canada: The Question of Language in 1901," *Historical Methods* Fall 2000, vol. 33, No. 4: 255-260.

4 T. Ricento and B. Burnaby, eds., *Language and Politics in the United States and Canada: Myths and Realities* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998.

5 For comparative perspectives, see David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel, eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002.