Immured in Cultural Walls: The Difficulties of Language Barriers

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The coexistence of two languages in one nation-state has the tendency to give rise to hostility, nationalism, racism, and many other insidious hydrae. The most readily sought solution is to eradicate or assimilate one language into the more dominant or prevalent language. But other solutions may very well be possible; concerning French and English, the first contact between the two languages resulted in 1066 with the battle of Hastings. The Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons and consequently colonized Britain. Norman French did not seep deeply into the vocabulary of the English language. Instead, Dick Leith states in his essay “The Origins of English” that “the dukedom of Normandy was gained by the king of France,” and, therefore, Anglo-Saxon “contacts with Normandy gave way to contact with the French court” (2002, p. 121). This means, though, that the English had access to the economy of central France as well. Consequently, for the English, “French came to be associated with social aspiration” (p. 122). Over time, Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward the French and French attitudes toward the English natives began to form. Dick Leith attempts to articulate this tension:

> Whatever view of the conquest is taken, one of its effects we can be sure about. It brought about a period of close contact and often bitter rivalry between the English and the French, which in some respects has lasted into the present century. Ideas about ‘Englishness’ often reflect whatever is considered to be ‘not French’, and these ideas have varied a great deal over such a long span of history. In general, attitudes to French and France can be characterized as ambivalent: hostility mixed with admiration (p. 121).

Leith emphasizes that this conflict has persisted even to present times; indeed, the different mindsets of each linguistic group, as I intend to analyze, has persisted especially with the conflict between English and
French in Quebec. With this in mind while tracing the growth and development of Quebec from a rural to an urban society, how does Quebec evolve ideologically throughout its history especially where the conflict between English and French is involved?

In order to better understand the tension between French and English in Quebec, it is important to historicize about Quebec itself before getting to the gritty heart of the problem: the language laws that restrict English. Similar to the Norman conquest of Britain beginning in the eleventh century, the British took Quebec during the Seven Years’ War from the French in 1759 at the Plains of Abraham, thus beginning the interaction of English colonizers and French natives in the province (Lemco, 1992, p. 424). Jonathan Lemco in his essay entitled “Quebec’s ‘Distinctive Character’” relates that Quebeckers were, for the time being, mostly unaffected by the loss to Britain; the only change was the ensuing sense of shame that came along with such a defeat (p. 424). He states, “Quebec automobile license plates today bear the motto Je me souviens, ‘I remember’” (p. 424). He emphasizes that the embarrassment of such a defeat incites Quebeckers to “never allow themselves to be threatened by outsiders (i.e., anglophones) again” (p. 424). Not only is the outcome of this battle important because it introduces English imperialists into the fray of a French colony, but also because of the reversal of a historical expectation; the French until this time could boast of their original conquest over England in the eleventh century, and, coincidentally, the feelings that followed such an event and engendered resentment in the English now took root into the bosom of every Quebecker. Thus the tension between French and English in Quebec began on a bitter note.

The British, after acquiring Quebec, allowed the natives to keep their cultural traditions and their language (p. 424). However, as Lemco highlights, the people of Quebec “regard themselves as having emerged from a relatively backward, agrarian, or urban working-class background” (p. 424). Yet instead of promoting feelings of rapprochement, the “church-dominated and culturally insular” community of Quebec simply withdrew even more so into itself (p. 424). Such a tight-knit, rural group promoted a strong sense of unanimity and allowed the Québécois community its first chance to define itself in contrast with the English Other. It is arguable, then, that even at this preliminary stage of colonization everything that being English signified, such as the culture, people, and especially the language, began to be seen in the negative. Also, the French Revolution in 1789 troubled Quebec so much that it further promoted the intense suspicion of foreigners. This means that the prospect of French freedom achieved by those outside of Quebec from traditional values such as the monarchy was highly unappealing to the common Quebecker. In fact, Lemco relates that the people of Quebec viewed the revolution as
“the work of the devil, depriving the clergy of their special privileges and bringing heathens or atheists to power” (p. 425). This seems to be a common motif for Quebecers: to keep the weight of the outside world from destroying inherent cultural values and traditions, Quebec reacts by isolating itself from those undesired stimuli. But this is merely a superficial truth; what is ultimately important about the reactions to these historical events is the emphasis it places on Quebec’s dominating, patriarchal social structures, such as the Catholic Church and close nuclear family, which symbolize the construction of cultural walls against outside forces that are perceived as disruptive to the status quo if not overtly evil.

In 1867, the Constitution of Canada was drafted, and it called for French and English as the official languages of the nation. Quebec entered into the confederation of provinces mostly because of a fear of becoming American (p. 425). This prevented Quebec from being identified with the English Other and further build up linguistic barriers. This has required them, then, under Canada’s constitution, to protect the usage of both French and English; (Bélanger, 2000b) but the adoption of laws that safeguard English is merely incidental, and I will discuss in detail later Quebec’s defiance of this constitutional provision. Yet at this time, the interaction between French and English had not amounted to much; Lemco emphasizes, “Even within Quebec, Francophones and Anglophones had little to do with each other” (1992, p. 425). Again, the nature of the isolated, agrarian society with its firmly demarcated, xenophobic religious structures is brought to the forefront in order to explain this phenomenon. The mere fact that the majority of Quebecers tilled the land instead of interacting with an increasingly industrialized world easily explains the indifference displayed toward English. Also, after more than a century of English presence, Quebecers still had not, by this time, made even the slightest effort to assimilate into the English community, nor had the English in that area attempted to enter into French society. Ronald F. Inglehart and Margaret Woodward in their essay “Language Conflicts and Political Community” suggest that at this stage in Quebec’s history, this is natural: “At a low level of development, the masses of the population are normally inert and irrelevant to the national politics of an extensive community” (p. 422). This explanation makes sense in relation to Quebec’s stage in history. Interestingly, Inglehart and Woodward posit that this is the first of three stages in the growth of a bilingual nation (p. 422). Before examining the second stage, it is important to depict the picture of the growing sense of nationalism and pride of national identity that began to rear its head in the 1960s.

Because the Francophones did not enter into the economic arena until the 1960s, “The relative isolation of Quebec permitted a strong sense of Québécois identity to evolve” (Lemco, 1992, p. 425). Indeed, the identity
of Quebecers was deemed vital for survival by this time; for example, about 900,000 French Canadians immigrated mainly to New England from 1840–1940. Thirty-two percent of those emigrating were of Québécois descent. Most of these people entered into the USA to live and earn a living for a time and planned to return later; according to Claude Bélanger, this presented a perceived threat to the Québécois community at large:

[The] peril was both personal and national. By moving to the United States, a land dominated by anglophones and Protestants, the emigrants put their faith and their language in great danger. Their personal salvation was put on the line in a country where materialist values predominated. By losing the shelter of the rural society, and the support of the family they had left behind, they risked becoming acculturated, and thus assimilated to the American way of life. By leaving Quebec in such large numbers, they threatened to so weaken the society they left behind that it might collapse altogether (Bélanger, 2000a).

First, this information indicates that not only was English perceived as the enemy and potential danger to a Quebecker’s identity, but it also signifies that English was believed to cause a person’s damnation. Becoming assimilated into the “Other” culture, then, signified national and spiritual degeneration, if not perdition. But this fear of assimilation also reveals the first articulated signs of national identity; instead of welcoming English or American ways, Quebec feared dissolution for the emigrants’ sense of cultural morality and identity. Crossing geographical boundaries meant losing the protection of the sheltered Québécois community, providing infectious English values to erode at the moral core of a temporary emigrant. The fact that these Quebecers would eventually return may have also been an important issue because American capitalism and materialist mindsets could have easily spread this way; this was probably as threatening to the Québécois way of life as the French Revolution was in the 18th century.

To address this fear of the loss of identity due to the degradation of cultural virtues, it is necessary to analyze the overall importance of language in the creation of cultural identity. Senator S. I. Hayakawa in his essay “The Case for Official English” argues:

What is it that has made a society of a hodgepodge of nationalities, races, and colors represented in the immigrant hordes that people our nation? It is language, of course, that has made communication among all these elements possible. It is with a common language that we have dissolved distrust and fear. It is with language that we have drawn up the understandings and agreements and social contracts that make society possible (1992, p. 94).
The same ideals were put forth during the 1960s and 1970s when Quebec's language laws came to the forefront. It is important to note Hayakawa's statement about the obliteration of fear and distrust; as bilingualism arose as an issue for America during his time and remains an important issue now, the desire to extinguish the flame of fear seems to pervade the nation of Quebec today as well. Although Hayakawa correctly states that language allows communication, he seems to downplay the fact that another language can smooth and break down the barriers erected by different cultures and also allow a society, isolated economically, linguistically, and culturally, an opportunity to improve itself. Instead of wearing away at cultural mores, the incorporation of another language may instead prove useful in breaking down xenophobic distrust that limits one culture from positively interacting with the other.

Conversely, Robert Bunge in his essay "Language: The Psyche of a People" argues:

A nation's language is a system of thought and expression peculiar to that nation and is the outward expression and manifestation of that nation's view of the universe. It is the key to the psychology and philosophy of a people and is the lens through which the national and individual psyche (soul) may be understood. Through its structure, phenomenological data are strained and even altered in accord with a manner the people can comprehend and make part of their worldview (1992, p. 377).

His point is valid and also provides insight into the seemingly necessary language laws issued by the Québeçois government. But it still argues for a monolingual nation. Carlos Alberto Montaner, in his essay "Talk English—You Are in the United States," which laments the stigma of Spanish in a bilingual country that is monolingual in its narrow-mindedness, comments, "American society spends thousands of millions of dollars every year in attempting unavailingly to get high school and college students to learn Spanish, because it is assumed that mastery of a second language benefits the country" (Montaner, 1992, p. 164). Indeed, the common motive for the promotion of the education of second languages is attended for economic benefit. This is pertinent to Quebec's bilingual dilemma in that problems between French and English became keenly prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, the decades in which Quebec began to excel economically for the first time. The problem is whether or not people are willing to sacrifice what is perceived as a loss of identity in allowing another language leeway in a highly structured society for sheer financial gain. The literal damnation of a culture becomes metaphorical here in that selling one's soul becomes equated with the promise of economic profit.

Still others provide an argument against bilingualism that puts forth that
countries of more than one language are at a loss economically. Einer Haugen in "The Curse of Babel" states:

The economic disadvantages of having more than one language in a country or in the world are so patent as to make an almost irresistible argument for homogenization to be used by administrators who are congenitally and professionally hospitable to language minorities (1992, p. 408).

He ends his essay by providing a positive spin to the issue, stating, "bilingualism offers the only human and ultimately hopeful way to . . . mitigate the curse of Babel" (p. 409). Therefore, arguments are made both for and against bilingualism as a means for promoting the economic welfare of a nation. Yet even Haugen’s argument against bilingualism for its economic pitfalls is not monolithic in its intent, for he provides the counterpoint that bilingualism provides an encounter that breaks down socially constructed barriers against the presence of the "Other" and also prevents one language from oppressing another by silencing its legal, political, and economic voice.

After a lengthy discussion on the economic issues, the second stage of Quebec's development is in need of analysis. The first bill issued in Quebec in order to take a stride in defending the French language was Bill 63 of 1969. It gave immigrant families the right to send their children to French schools while also requiring the teaching of French in all English schools. This was the first step to protect French in Quebec because by this time, English was seen as not only an economic competitor, but a cultural competitor; since Quebec’s population could be boosted enormously by the influx of immigrants, it sought to teach French to as many immigrants as possible, thus winning out over English.

Bill 22 was enforced in 1974 and instituted harsher restrictions. Claude Bélanger relates:

The law proclaimed French the official language in Quebec, set up a Régie de la langue française to supervise the application of the bill, imposed on all public institutions the duty to address the public administration in French, made French the official language of contracts, forced corporations to give themselves a French name and to advertise primarily in French in Quebec as well as to seek a certificate of francization which could only be obtained when it was demonstrated that the business could function in French and address its employees in French. On the subject of schools, it maintained the freedom of choice for the language of instruction, but subjected the entrance into English schools to those children that a test showed had a knowledge of English (Bélanger, 2000b).
This caused an uproar for Anglophones in Quebec; not only did it infringe on the speakers of English and their economic liberty, but it also forced immigrants who had no prior knowledge of English into the French system. This not only gave Francophones more economic and cultural security, but it also gave them a way to increase their population by the assimilation of foreigners that, up until the implementation of Bill 22, had all but opted to learn English. Again, this was utterly necessary in keeping French population numbers from decreasing.

Bill 101, issued in 1977, took the restrictions even further; it tightened entrance into the English education system in the country and imposed various different restrictions on language use in the media, advertisement, government, and basically every aspect of life (Bélanger, 2000b). This signifies the culmination of Inglehart and Woodward's second stage, "where . . . the divisive force exerted by multiple language groups will be greatest" (1992, p. 423). Jonathan Lemco explains that this force has caused almost 200,000 English Quebecers who are "often the best educated" to emigrate (p. 423). He also prognosticates, "These circumstances do not bode well for Quebec's economic future" (p. 432). Thus, in forcing French upon immigrants, the adverse effect has ironically occurred.

Yet this is not necessarily true for the Quebec of today. Bélanger remarks that many of the provisions of Bill 101 have been repealed because they conflict with Canada's constitution. Data show that efforts to become bilingual have increased among Francophones and Anglophones in Quebec. For example, Anglophones are more likely to be bilingual than Francophones in Quebec according to the 1991 census. This shows an attempt to reduce the conflict between the clash of languages and also an attempt to more readily access the economic arena of Quebec. The 1991 census also indicates that in Quebec bilingual Anglophones and Francophones make almost the same amount of money annually and make six thousand dollars more than those that only speak English and about ten thousand dollars more than those that only speak French. According to Inglehardt and Woodward's theory, then, Quebec has entered "a high level of political/economic development" that allows for "most upwardly mobile individuals [to] have the opportunity to become fluent in one or more languages" (1992, p. 422). Some in Quebec argue for secession from Canada in order to fully implement a monolingual constitution. However, many critics describe the potential faults inherent in the idea of secession, an idea that Quebec has tried to achieve in full. Lawrence E. Harrison in his essay "Quebec Secession Revisited" states:

The wrenching of Quebec from Canada would present monumental and anguishing legal, financial, and political problems, and the threat of prolonged friction and even violence. That reality, coupled with the many uncertainties that surround a sovereign Quebec's relationships with the US—with potentially serious consequences for Quebec's economic well-being (1998, p. 9).
The main downfall of Quebec's secession involves the fact that if such an event were to happen, the language barriers between French and English would only grow to be much worse. And since French and English bilinguals are dominant economically, this indicates that such an event would reduce the benefits that bilingualism has to offer in Quebec altogether.

Evidently, then, not only are bilingual Francophones and Anglophones excelling economically in Quebec, but they are also gaining the ability to communicate in a manner conducive to cultural exchange. The French in Quebec do not necessarily have to cease being French in order to attain economic security; however, knowledge of the English language appears to be the key to this security in the globalization that is rapidly increasing every day. Some personal or national security involving identity must be forfeited, to some extent, in order to maximize economic security both for Anglophones and Francophones. Yet because this calls for bilingualism over Quebec's monolingual language law history, finally the gap between the French and the English may have a chance to become less divisive.

References


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