



It's time for a conversation about merits of bilingualism

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Premier François Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec government have repeatedly claimed that the French language and culture are in decline in this province, requiring aggressive political intervention.

The evidence for this supposed decline is hardly unequivocal and certainly subject to interpretation.

Jean-Pierre Corbeil, Richard Marcoux and Victor Piché presented dramatically different interpretations of the pertinent social science data in their 2023 book *Le français en déclin?*

Repenser la francophonie Québécoise. The divergent arguments frequently hinge upon attitudes toward bilingualism. For example, is “Bonjour-hi” a disrespectful denial of Quebec’s unilingual aspirations, or a pragmatic accommodation of bilingual reality?

Similarly, divergent views on language lie at the heart of one of the most disputed episodes of Quebec history. Did immigrants prior to Bill 101 reject Quebec’s majority language because English provided better opportunities?

Or were they stymied by the rejection by French Catholic schools of non-catholic students (Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Protestant) and even Italians, who were Catholic?

The facts and their interpretation remain subject to debate. One factor that has been often misunderstood is that immigrants are linguistically pragmatic.

Italians, for example, whether educated in French or English, learned both languages and often retained their mother tongue. The St-léonard riots of 1969 were not about immigrants refusing to learn French, but about them wanting to learn French and English.

Being bilingual does not mean rejecting French.

A generation ago, fewer than 30 per cent of Quebecers were bilingual. In the most recent census, the number reached 46 per cent. On the island of Montreal, the majority of residents are bilingual. An even larger majority, including children of Bill 101, speak French fluently, although it may not be their mother tongue.

When the CAQ government and other language hawks say English is a problem, or lack of French is a problem, what they are really saying is: Bilingualism is a problem. Knowledge of another language is a problem.

The CAQ wants to reduce the number of English-speaking students and immigrants. They want to reduce English in the workplace, in academia and on the streets.

Is this rejection of English good for Quebec?

It is hard to believe that this is what the majority of Quebecers would want. You would think that they would want to be like many successful Quebec politicians, business leaders, academics and artists: bilingual.

Many immigrants are attracted to Quebec because of its French language and culture.

However, they are also emigrating to North America, and many want to learn English.

Anglophones undoubtedly have better French skills than previous generations, but no language law or government directive will force them to unlearn English. As such, it seems they are condemned to continue to be perceived as a problem.

After half a century of increasingly strict language laws, what do current trends suggest for the future? Most Quebecers will speak French. This is good news, or should be.

Children born in Quebec will have better language skills than their immigrant parents. This is also good news, or should be.

However, despite stronger protections for French, more Quebecers will be bilingual, and multilingual.

This is reality. And an asset. It's time the Quebec government and wider society recognize it as such.

Let's challenge the validity of the narratives peddled by those who continue to portray English-speakers and immigrants as threats.

Let's start a serious public conversation across the linguistic and political spectrum about the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism. This is what this opinion piece seeks to do.

A version was offered to the three francophone dailies in Montreal. The response so far: unanimous silence. We wonder: Does this discussion not merit attention in the French-language media?

We invite our francophone neighbours to join us in this conversation.

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