



The Linguistic Duality Debate in English Canada in 2019, 1969, and 1929

Robert J. Talbot

Number 17, 2021

50 ans de mise en oeuvre de la *Loi sur les langues officielles* : bilan et perspectives
50 Years of Implementing the *Official Languages Act*: Review and Prospects

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084702ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084702ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques / Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities

ISSN

1927-8632 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Talbot, R. J. (2021). The Linguistic Duality Debate in English Canada in 2019, 1969, and 1929. *Minorités linguistiques et société / Linguistic Minorities and Society*, (17), 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084702ar>

Article abstract

Changes to the political landscape have revived the debate over linguistic duality. That debate, however, is not altogether new. Many of the arguments being made in 2019, upon the fiftieth anniversary of the *Official Languages Act*, were not unlike those of 1969, when Canada adopted the Act, or even 1929, when government took modest measures to recognize English and French at the post office.

In 1929, 1969 and 2019, some believed that pan-Canadian recognition of linguistic duality would serve national unity. Others, however, wondered whether it was compatible with the ethnocultural diversity of the country, or asserted that federal bilingualism in their province was not justified, citing populist, demographic or identity-based arguments. The debate—90 years ago, 50 years ago, or even today—has often given rise to fear and misunderstanding; however, it has also benefited from the persistence of moderates from both of Canada's official language communities.

The Linguistic Duality Debate in English Canada in 2019, 1969, and 1929

Robert J. Talbot

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada
Commissariat aux langues officielles du Canada

Abstract

Changes to the political landscape have revived the debate over linguistic duality. That debate, however, is not altogether new. Many of the arguments being made in 2019, upon the fiftieth anniversary of the *Official Languages Act*, were not unlike those of 1969, when Canada adopted the Act, or even 1929, when government took modest measures to recognize English and French at the post office.

In 1929, 1969 and 2019, some believed that pan-Canadian recognition of linguistic duality would serve national unity. Others, however, wondered whether it was compatible with the ethnocultural diversity of the country, or asserted that federal bilingualism in their province was not justified, citing populist, demographic or identity-based arguments. The debate—90 years ago, 50 years ago, or even today—has often given rise to fear and misunderstanding; however, it has also benefited from the persistence of moderates from both of Canada's official language communities.

Résumé

Des changements dans le paysage politique ont relancé le débat sur la dualité linguistique. Ce débat n'est pas nouveau. Bon nombre des arguments avancés en 2019, lors du cinquantième anniversaire de la *Loi sur les langues officielles*, ressemblaient fort à ceux de 1969, lorsque le Canada a adopté la Loi, ou même à ceux de 1929, quand le gouvernement a prescrit de modestes mesures pour l'usage des deux langues à la poste.

En 1929, 1969 et 2019, certains croyaient qu'une reconnaissance pancanadienne de la dualité linguistique servirait l'unité nationale. D'autres, cependant, se demandaient si cela pouvait être compatible avec la diversité ethnoculturelle, ou affirmaient, en invoquant le populisme, la démographie ou l'identité, que le bilinguisme fédéral n'était pas justifié dans leur province. De nos jours comme il y a 50 ou 90 ans, le débat engendre souvent des craintes et des malentendus. En revanche, il bénéficie de la persévérance de Canadiens modérés de chacune des deux communautés de langue officielle.

2019

In his article for *The Walrus* magazine on the 50th anniversary of the *Official Languages Act*, entitled “Beyond Bilingualism,” Montreal author Mark Abley stated that “the *Official Languages Act* incarnates a vision of Canadian identity that, to many people, seems less and less relevant,” due to Canada’s increasingly “multilingual nature” and “the continued erosion of French outside Quebec” (Abley, 2018, p. 32). While concerns over the future of French in Canada should not be taken lightly, it bears reminding that the Francophone population, both in and outside of Quebec, has grown in overall numbers, and that, as of the 2016 census, French remained by far the most common language in Canada after English, including outside Quebec (OCOL, 2018).

In the 2019 *Radio-Canada* documentary “Bi* – Bilinguisme, la grande utopie canadienne,” produced for the 50th anniversary of the Act, interviewer Frédéric Choinière also explored some of the current discourse against federal bilingualism, in both traditional and social media. Among anti-bilingualism commentators, the arguments included an emphasis on a territorial delineation for official languages (i.e., French Quebec/English rest-of-Canada), the minimization of the French-speaking population outside Quebec, an exaggeration of the scope of the Act (including an exaggeration of the bilingualism requirements in the federal public service), and the assertion that recognizing two languages instead of one was unfair and unrealistic in the context of Canada’s growing diversity. As one anti-bilingualism commentator asserted in the documentary:

Canada is not a bilingual country [. . .] It’s a country that has a bilingualism act, but it is in no practical sense a country in which English and French are equally spoken [. . .] It in no way describes the reality in Western Canada [. . .] The idea that there are two official languages, that there are two sorts of Canadians whose linguistic needs are more important than everybody else’s, I reject that premise [. . .] I don’t think you can create this artificial construct in which you pretend that there is equal demand for French and English services across the country, and then thus we have to have this bilingual ruling class administering public services [. . .] As Canada becomes more diverse, it is going to seem much more of an affront. (Choinière & Madore, 2019)

These kinds of statements are not representative of Anglo-Canadian opinion in general (OCOL, 2016). Moreover, they are also often erroneous (French continues to have an important presence outside Quebec, the Act does not in fact require all federal offices to be bilingual, most federal public service positions are unilingual, etc.). However, the perceptions that such statements may serve to perpetuate can have real policy implications. For instance, in his defence of cuts to French-language services in Ontario in 2018, Premier Doug Ford cited the presence of other linguistic minorities, Mandarin, Cantonese and Italian, for example, as justification. The provincial government simply “couldn’t please everybody,” he explained (Sharp, 2018). The historical rights of Franco-Ontarians aside, the premier appeared to be

unaware of the fact that, after English, French remains more common in Ontario than any other language—in 2016, over 600,000 Ontarians spoke French at home, twice that of the next most-spoken minority language, Mandarin (Statistics Canada, 2019).

When brought to their logical conclusion, the premise that these kinds of statements convey is the same: language rights are a zero-sum game. Taken further, they open the door to a populist majoritarian discourse wherein different minority groups are to be weighed against one another; not necessarily for the purposes of *granting* rights and recognition, but rather, for the purposes of *removing* rights and recognition. In such a race to the bottom, the only group to come out on top will inevitably be the majority itself (Théberge & Talbot, 2019).

If this line of reasoning sounds familiar today, that is because we have heard it before in English-speaking Canada, at other key moments in the evolution of the country's federal linguistic regime. A brief consideration of two other key moments in that evolution will help to make the point: the well-documented debate over the adoption of the first federal *Official Languages Act*, in 1969, and the less well-known debate that occurred upon the introduction of modest measures to promote bilingualism at the federal level in 1929. What is useful about considering the dates of 1929, 1969, and 2019 (beyond their pleasant numerical near-symmetry, of course!), is that there is enough time separating them—roughly two generations between each period—to ensure that we are dealing with an entirely new cast of characters in each case. The ideas and arguments are thus not merely recycled talking points being put forward by the same people, but rather an unconscious repetition of core values and lines of reasoning. These years are also useful to consider because, as was the case in 2019, the debates in 1969 and in 1929 occurred not long after important anniversaries of Confederation, at a time when commentators, politicians and intellectuals had been contemplating the very nature of what it means to be Canadian (Hayday & Blake, 2016). Lastly, 1929 and 1969 are worthy of particular consideration alongside 2019 because, as was the case for the year of the 50th anniversary of the federal OLA, 1969 and 1929 centred on discussions about the federal linguistic regime in particular, and all of the implications for access to jobs, service delivery, official language minorities and cultural diversity that came with it.¹

1. Of course, this is not to say that other dates—1867 and 1982, for example—are lacking in significance (I have discussed federal bilingualism in 1867, for instance, elsewhere; see Talbot, 2017). Those events entailed further reaching constitutional implications that go beyond the scope and means of this article. Moreover, the context in 1867 was very different than that of 1929, 1969 and 2019, coming as it did before the creation and expansion of a merit-based federal public service during and after the First World War, and before the earliest beginnings of Canadian multiculturalism in the 1920s, both of which gave rise to some of the familiar issues surrounding federal bilingualism today (see Talbot, 2014). For its part, in addition to its wide-ranging constitutional implications, 1982 included many of the same key players that had been present in 1969 when the OLA was adopted. It has thus been set aside out of an effort to ensure that we are dealing with a new cast of characters with each period under consideration.

In addition to including original primary research (an analysis of newspaper articles for 1969² and of archival materials and newspaper clippings for 1929), this chapter benefits from the important work of other scholars. Taken together, the historiography has shown that Anglo-Canadian discourse around linguistic duality has long been part of broader discussions on national identity and national values. In the 1920s, some Anglo-Canadian intellectuals began embracing Canada's French past as a means for a more inclusive, unique and engaging historical narrative (Wright, 2005), whereas others argued against recognition for French, out of fear that the country's British identity and cultural homogeneity were beginning to slip away (Pitsula, 2013). By the late 1960s, the new narrative in favour of a bilingual and multicultural country had become mainstream in English-speaking Canada, leading to "a long whine of bilious platitudes" among the vocal minority opposed to federal bilingualism who were afraid that the growing acknowledgement of Canada's diversity would fragment the nation (Igartua, 2006, p. 193; Hayday, 2015). Analyses of more recent Anglo-Canadian attitudes toward bilingualism, in the early 2000s, have also found that "le débat qui oppose partisans et détracteurs du bilinguisme oppose également deux manières de concevoir ce que l'on pourrait nommer les fins du Canada, c'est-à-dire sa raison d'être" (Charbonneau, 2015, p. 15).

The primary focus of this article is to demonstrate that, looking back, from 2019 to 1969—and still further back to 1929—for nearly a century now, many of the themes and arguments in English-speaking Canada for and against linguistic duality appear to have essentially remained the same (although the relative emphasis placed on each has certainly changed over time). This should be of interest to bilingualism advocates today, in part because it brings into question the claims to originality of contemporary sceptics who argue that federal bilingualism has become "less and less relevant." For instance, the question of how linguistic duality intersects with Canada's broader diversity is nothing new; national unity and Canada's international image have long been key considerations; the historical rights of English- and French-speakers have been a recurrent theme; and ensuring equitable access to the benefits of bilingualism has remained a hot topic. Another ongoing feature of the debate that this chapter aims to highlight, and that should also be of interest to bilingualism advocates today, is the important role that moderate Anglophone civil society leaders have played in helping to inject a modicum of civility into the discourse and in persuading others that official bilingualism is not only just, but also a benefit to Canada as a whole. Indeed, it has been the efforts of these *allies* from within the majority that have helped make the advancement of the language rights of the minority politically possible.

2. I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Emmanuel Masson, who assisted with research associated with this project, specifically in collecting and analyzing newspaper articles from key dates in 1968 and 1969, including from the *The Globe and Mail*, the *Winnipeg Free-Press*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the Moncton *Évangéline*, the Saint-Boniface *La Liberté*, and the Montreal *La Presse*.

1969

In June 1969, *Toronto Telegram* columnist Dennis Braithwaither described his opposition to the new *Official Languages Act* in terms that would not be entirely unfamiliar in 2019: “We are not afraid of any aspect of the [new] language bill,” he wrote. “We simply regard it as unnecessary, politically motivated, costly to implement, divisive, and, as it affects the non-English, non-French third of the population, wholly discriminatory” (Braithwaither in Fraser, 2006, p. 106). For this bilingualism sceptic, invoking concern for the plight of Allophones served as an argument against Francophone minority-language rights.

Other, majoritarian and populist arguments against official bilingualism were also invoked in 1969. Minimizing the relative demographic weight of the Francophone minority outside Quebec, for example, even if it meant pulling facts and figures out of thin air, was one means for asserting that recognition for the minority constituted an unreasonable imposition on the majority. One letter to the editor of *The Globe and Mail* complained that Francophones in Manitoba were under 1% of the provincial population, when in actuality they were closer to 7% (letter to the editor from Pauline Dix, *The Globe and Mail*, 16 February 1969). Opponents of the 1969 *Official Languages Act* also sought to minimize the need for French in the federal public service, and even those who expressed cautious support for the bill showed concern that the proposed language requirements of federal employees would lead to discrimination against Anglophones, since they tended to be less bilingual than their Francophone counterparts (Seale, 1968, p. 1; Manion, 1969, p. 6; *La Presse*, 1969, February 1). Conspiracy theories, or what we might refer to as “fake news” today, were also present in 1969, the most prevalent of which was the allegation that the new OLA was a plot to make all Canadians bilingual. In response, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his cabinet found themselves having to spend about as much time explaining what the new law did *not* intend to do as they did explaining what it *did* intend to achieve (Trudeau, 1968; Pelletier, 1990).

While some Anglophone Canadians remained sceptical or even fearful of the new official languages bill in 1969, there was nevertheless an overall consensus in favour of its adoption. In his book, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-71*, José Igartua explains how the adoption of the *Official Languages Act* was part of the broader shift taking place in Anglophone society away from British symbols and toward “a new national identity” that included recognition of the equality of the two pan-Canadian linguistic groups (Igartua, 2006, p. 192). Civil society moderates played an important role in contributing to this change through the media. “In the press,” Igartua explains, “the principle [of bilingualism] was widely accepted and its opponents denigrated” (Igartua, 2006, p. 221).

The arguments that civil society moderates invoked in favour of the OLA were similar to those invoked today, albeit with a different level of emphasis in light of the different political context. For instance, the issue of national unity, although a familiar argument in favour of linguistic duality today, was more prominent in 1969 because of the recent rise of Quebec secessionism. It was for this reason that the Kitchener-Waterloo daily *The Record*, in an article that was picked up in the French-language press, warned readers that without linguistic duality, “Canada would cease to exist” (Kitchener-Waterloo *The Record*, 1968, p. 4). In a similar vein, *The Calgary Albertan* denounced the “francophobe bigots” and dubbed the new bill to be “an important weapon in the battle for unity” (*Calgary Albertan*, 1968, p. 4).

Other Anglophone supporters of the 1969 bill told readers that the *Official Languages Act* presented an opportunity for those who wished it for themselves or for their children to become bilingual. One letter to the editor published by *The Globe and Mail* highlighted the growth in demand for French-language courses. In addition to the positive effect that the new bill was having, they noted the international appeal of French and the innate human desire to learn about another culture and another reality, both in Canada and abroad (letter to the editor from A.P. Purdue, *The Globe and Mail*, 16 February 1969).

Still other sympathetic Anglophones asserted that the 1969 OLA constituted an act of historical justice, not only for Francophones from Quebec, but for Francophones across Canada. The day after the bill was adopted, on June 9, 1969, the *Vancouver Sun* published an article explaining that it was a simple matter of justice for both language groups to have the same rights and recognition, no matter where they lived:

In years to come Canadians will wonder why there should have been so much contrived meanness shown in 1969 about such an obviously fair piece of legislation as the Official Languages Bill. They will find it hard to credit the sheer shrewiness of many of those who are now striving to magnify the Bill’s inconveniences out of all proportion to its nation-binding benefits [. . .] Indeed, the overwhelming support already expressed in [the House of] Commons for the legislation testifies to the innate decency and generosity of the country as a whole. Despite the fears of the honest doubters and the barely disguised racialism of the bigots, the public has endorsed the principle that French-speakers outside Quebec must have the same rights as English-speakers inside Quebec (*Vancouver Sun*, June 10, 1969, p. 4).

For the *Vancouver Sun*, at least, the OLA was a testament to the country’s character, and the opposition demonstrated by the loud minority of naysayers was, in turn, a reflection of their own lack thereof.

1929

Looking back another forty years to 1929, at the time of another, lesser-known, milestone in official languages, similar arguments were being made for and against linguistic

duality in the English-language discourse, albeit with greater emphasis on some arguments and less on others, in keeping with the political context of the time. Once again, moderate Anglophone civil society leaders writing in the popular press played an important role in helping to bring about a level of civility to the conversation, whether by shouting down the bigots in their midst or by explaining the arguments in favour of federal bilingualism in terms that other Anglophones could understand. In so doing, they helped pave the way for political change.

The 1929 debate on linguistic duality centred on a series of modest but symbolically important measures that the federal government had begun implementing in the late 1920s to better recognize the equality of English and French at the federal level, in what I have termed elsewhere a policy of “unofficial official bilingualism” (Talbot, 2018, p. 165). This included bilingual celebrations for the 60th anniversary of Confederation along with the introduction of bilingual stamps and, beginning in 1929, the printing of bilingual postal forms for use in all post offices across the country, in addition to the hiring of a small number of bilingual employees to provide service in a few key offices in Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick (in addition to Quebec, where there were already some bilingual employees). In other words, Canadians would now have at least some ability to interact with the post—at the time their main point of contact with the federal government—in both languages, including beyond the borders of Quebec. These measures were implemented by Postmaster-General Pierre Veniot, an Acadian and former premier of New Brunswick (1923-1925). Veniot had moved to federal politics in 1926, one year after losing a provincial election that had been marred by an anti-Catholic, anti-French whispering campaign driven by that most odious of American exports, the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK’s American leadership and its new Canadian membership were working hard to normalize racist, populist majoritarian discourse in Canada by tapping into the pre-existing local brand of British-Canadian ethnic nationalism (Pitsula, 2013).

For Veniot, only the second Francophone from outside Quebec to serve in a federal cabinet, the national stage was a means for sidestepping regional opposition and asserting a vision of linguistic duality that extended to all of Canada. He understood that for bilingualism to gain acceptance at the provincial level, the federal level would need to demonstrate leadership and help to normalize the principle of bilingualism nationally.

The new policy of bilingual stamps and postal forms appears to have been generally accepted in the country as a whole, but nevertheless it sparked a localized debate on the principle of duality. The debate occurred in Saskatchewan, where growing angst over the province’s increasing ethnocultural diversity, the recent arrival of the KKK, and a desire to unseat the government of minority-rights advocate Premier James Gardiner had led some conservatives to use anti-bilingualism as a means for whipping up populist majoritarian

sentiment for political gain. The discourse was centred on one fundamental question: Was Canada a bilingual and bicultural country, from coast to coast, to coast, or was it an English country with a bilingual element territorially confined to the province of Quebec?

Things came to a head in the late summer of 1929, just as Veniot's department had begun rolling out the distribution of bilingual postal forms to offices across the country. On September 9th, the *Regina Daily Star*, the province's main conservative organ, published a story about a local judge who had refused to accept a bilingual postal card that had been forwarded to his address. The newspaper could scarcely contain its righteous indignation at the *soi-disant* scandal, invoking a line of argumentation that, despite its hyperbole, can be summarized in terms that are not unfamiliar from a 2019 perspective. The imposition of bilingualism, the *Regina Daily Star* asserted, was an imposition of eastern Canadian values that were inconsistent with the western Canadian reality. Worse, it was part of a Francophone conspiracy—it was a slippery slope that would undermine the majority language and culture and make French the language of daily interaction:

The Postmaster-General of Canada has had [bilingual material] printed for use in western Canada as part of the plot to force English-speaking people to acknowledge French as the language of Canada [. . .] It is a crafty trick [. . .] Demand is [even] being made that [our money] should be bilingual [. . .] there will be no let up in the efforts of the Quebec influences [. . .] The campaign to force French upon the British majority in western Canada is untiring and unceasing. (*Regina Daily Star*, September 9, 1929)

The newspaper went on, asserting that the changes would lead to preferential terms for Francophone candidates applying to well-paid federal jobs:

Efforts to bring the Civil Service of Canada under French control have been made effective by departmental regulation. The regulation takes the form of a preference in all appointments and promotions of those who are bilingual. (*Regina Daily Star*, September 9, 1929)

In addition to spreading rumours and conspiracy theories, the *Regina Daily Star* was also alleged to have published what one might call fake news today, specifically, false information provided by the KKK. “[It is a] characteristic of that paper,” complained Saskatchewan MP William George Bock to Veniot, “to mention a part of a fact in such a manner as will leave a false impression in the mind of the reader [. . .] and to harp on the strings of racial and religious discord.” Bock suggested the anti-bilingualism whispering campaign was being driven by foreign influences: “it would not be hard to establish a direct connection between the Canadian KKK and the Central Organization in New York” (letter from William George Bock to Pierre Veniot, September 1929). He was not far off the mark. It came to Veniot's attention that a single post office employee who was also a member of the KKK engaged in a campaign of misinformation. The employee had been sending the *Regina Daily Star* copies of postal forms with the French blacked out in an effort to make it seem as though there was widespread public opposition to the new bilingual format.

Other opponents of federal bilingualism in 1929 invoked a less sensational and conspiratorial line of argument that, despite being more diplomatic in tone, nevertheless appealed to a populist majoritarian sentiment. It was a line of reasoning that would not be out of place among the writings of bilingualism skeptics in 1969, or even in 2019.

The case in point was A.M. Murray, a Saskatchewan lawyer who exchanged a series of cordial letters with Veniot. Like the bilingualism skeptics of 1969 and 2019, Murray minimized the relevance of French, both at home and abroad. Murray argued that, on the international stage, “the pendulum has gradually swung away from French and towards English as the common language,” and that an exclusive use of English was more befitting an “up-and-coming nation like Canada” (letter from A. M. Murray to Pierre Veniot, March 20, 1930). Referring to the local context, Murray asserted that French had little importance in western Canada—that it could even be considered a “foreign” language:

Now, sir, most people have nothing whatever against French as such, any more than they may have against any other foreign language – and French is a foreign language in Saskatchewan and will always be regarded as such. To me, personally, French is a beautiful language [. . .] Nevertheless, I respectfully beg to emphasize that English is the medium of human intercourse in this Province. (letter from A.M. Murray to Pierre Veniot, March 8, 1930)

To minimize the relevance of French and assert its “foreign” character, Murray lumped it in with every other minority language in the province:

You see, we have a very cosmopolitan population in this Province. There are a very considerable number of Scandinavian, German, Slovakian and other foreign settlers with their descendants in Saskatchewan, who greatly outnumber either French or French-Canadian settlers and their descendants, people who contend with perfect justification [. . .] [that their] languages are just as much entitled to a place on such postal cards circulated in this Province as is French. The consequence is they resent French on postal matter for use in Saskatchewan. (letter from A.M. Murray to Pierre Veniot, March 8, 1930)

Murray made it clear, however, that he had no intention of advocating for greater recognition of this broader diversity: “postal matter [should] be printed entirely in English, as it is obviously impossible to print every language spoken in Saskatchewan.” For Murray, it would seem that invoking Saskatchewan’s broader diversity was only an argument of convenience, intended not to advocate for greater recognition of all minorities, but rather for the purpose of undermining the rights and recognition, limited as they were, that were already in place for one of them. Then, as now, those who opposed linguistic duality were not likely to be allies of multiculturalism.

While there was localized opposition to the modest federal bilingualism of 1929, it bears pointing out that, as in 1969 and 2019, there were Anglophone supporters of bilingualism, as well.

One of the first to act was former Saskatchewan premier Charles Dunning, who allied with Veniot to organize an awareness campaign among western Canadian journalists and MPs. The campaign sought to combat misinformation, clarify the actual intent of the federal policy—what it did and did not intend to accomplish—and defend the principle of linguistic duality more generally. Veniot was grateful for the support. “I am convinced that when the facts are placed before the public,” he wrote, “it will readily appear to everyone that there does not exist any real foundation for these attacks” (letter from Pierre Veniot to parliamentarians, September 19, 1929).

Veniot, Dunning and their supporters wrote to newspapers and MPs explaining that French postal forms already existed and that a bilingual format would allow for standardization, cheaper and easier printing, and use both internationally and in Canada. They explained that bilingual employees would only be required at offices that needed them and—in response to the charge that this would favour Francophones—pointed out that unilingual Francophones were just as excluded from bilingual jobs as were unilingual Anglophones. Finally, they emphasized that the policy was, at heart, aimed at encouraging national unity, explaining to MPs and journalists that “it was thought that a continuation of this kind of [policy] would tend to bind more closely together the two great races which have cooperated in such an unselfish manner to make Canada” (letter from Pierre Veniot to parliamentarians, September 19, 1929).

Refuting the assertion that French had grown less relevant on the international stage, Veniot pointed out that recent international agreements had actually required the use of French because it was the language of international mail. Dunning took it further; cited in *La Presse*, he highlighted not only international necessity but also the personal advantages of bilingualism: “La belle leçon de bilinguisme que nous a donnée [la Société des nations à] Genève [. . .] devrait inciter tous les Canadiens à mieux connaître les deux langues officielles de ce pays [. . .] Les Canadiens capables de parler les deux langues ont de grands avantages sur les autres” (Dunning, November 1929).

Dunning and Veniot were joined in their campaign by William George Bock, the MP for Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, and W.F. Kerr, former editor of the *Regina Leader* newspaper. Their correspondence with Veniot conveyed both a sense of frustration with their home province and a feeling of embarrassment and guilt by association. “This whole campaign by the *Regina Star* is, of course, petty and hardly deserves attention,” Kerr insisted. “Unfortunately, it is having some effect” (letter from W.F. Kerr to Pierre Veniot, January 6, 1930). Kerr and Bock reassured Veniot that Saskatchewanians were not inherently bad people, but rather that they were being manipulated by an insidious foreign-backed campaign of disinformation. “In my opinion,” wrote Bock, “if it were possible to make this clear to the public it should certainly help neutralize the political effect of their lousy propaganda” (letter from William George Bock to Pierre Veniot, September 1929).

Kerr and Bock worked to develop a coherent argumentation in defence of bilingualism, including key messages for circulation to newspapers that they hoped would resonate with the Anglophone majority. The message from moderates in 1929 was not unlike the message in 1969, or even 2019. The liberal-leaning Moose Jaw *Daily Times* was among those to pick up on it, in 1929. The *Daily Times* explained to readers that the policy of bilingualism at the post office had been put into place as a matter of justice and pragmatism, for it ensured better communication with *all* Canadians, English- and French-speaking. The newspaper asserted that French was a veritably pan-Canadian language, pointing out that there were Francophones not only in Quebec but all across the country. They, too, should reasonably expect to have some level of access to postal materials and services in their language:

There are thousands of post offices in Canada, extending from Prince Edward Island to Vancouver. ... [Postal] forms in French, or at least bilingual in character, are an absolute necessity in the province of Quebec, in certain portions of Ontario and the Maritime provinces, and a matter of convenience [...] in certain districts in all provinces. (Moose Jaw *Daily Times*, January 4, 1930)

For its part, the *Regina Leader*, Kerr's former newspaper, used a heavy dose of sarcasm to debunk the conspiracy theories and to show the sheer meanness of those who opposed federal bilingualism. The newspaper pointed out that the bilingualism measures were actually quite benign, and it mocked the assertion that federal bilingualism constituted an unreasonable imposition on the English-speaking majority:

The other day a French letterhead reached the office of the [*Daily Star*] at Regina from someone in the Press Gallery of the House of Commons at Ottawa [...] This led the editor to a brisk gnashing of teeth and a sturdy editorial declamation to the effect that the influence of Quebec has been brought to bear [...] What next? [...] the fact is that the lads [...] at Ottawa are used to [French, and] that the situation emerged [under] Sir John A. Macdonald [...] [Perhaps] the boys in Saskatchewan should open a campaign to get rid of this [...] traitor to the English language! (*Regina Leader*, February 21, 1930)

Appealing to more open-minded readers, the moderate Saskatchewan English-language press of 1929-1930 invoked the now-familiar arguments of historical precedent and national unity. Linguistic duality was, as the *Moose Jaw Evening Times* explained, the very thing that had made, and that continued to make, the Canadian political experiment possible:

Confederation was a union not only of Provinces but of peoples, the French-speaking and the English-speaking, to make one great Dominion. Without either of them Confederation would have been impossible. (*Moose Jaw Evening Times*, January 4, 1930)

The policy of federal bilingualism, continued the *Evening Times*, was meant to have “the effect of still further uniting both races in bonds of loyalty to their common country and in more united endeavours to advance its interests. That spirit, which the *Regina Star* deplors and is doing its best to destroy, still lives” (*Moose Jaw Evening Times*, January 4, 1930).

Lessons from 1929 and 1969, for 2019 and Beyond

If the overarching themes and arguments around linguistic duality present in English-Canadian discourse in 2019, 1969 and even 1929 remained somewhat static, the moderates of civil society nevertheless appear to have succeeded in moving the needle of broader opinion. Already, by the mid-1930s, a strong majority of Anglophone federal MPs, including Saskatchewan MPs, was prepared to vote in favour of the symbolically significant milestone of bilingual currency (Talbot, 2018). In 1969, public opinion surveys suggested that a modest majority of the public supported the new *Official Languages Act* (Regenstreif, 1969). More recently, a 2016 telephone survey found that 84% of Canadians supported bilingualism for all of Canada. According to the same survey, 8 in 10 agreed that “having two official languages has made Canada a more welcoming place for immigrants from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds” (OCOL, 2016). Support for linguistic duality and for multiculturalism, it turns out, are not mutually exclusive. Undoubtedly, public opinion is malleable, and it remains to be seen whether the normalization in recent years of populist majoritarian discourse south of the border, for instance, will have had an impact here in Canada, in 2019 (and beyond), just as it did in 1929.

One thing that has changed, and that continues to change, is the medium through which Canadians discuss and debate the merits of linguistic duality. If, as Marshall McLuhan famously stated, “the medium is the message,” then current changes in popular media, notably the advent of social media, may be having unforeseen impacts on the messages that are ultimately shaping how the general public perceives duality. For, whereas moderate civil society leaders in 1929 and 1969 were able to play an important role in shaping public opinion via the traditional press, this was less the case in 2019. Today’s popular means of communication allow just about anyone to publish and disseminate their opinions, with or without fact checking, and the spoils often go to those who yell the loudest, talk the fastest, forego nuance, and express the most shocking or extreme views. Nuance and reflection—two critical means for encouraging moderate discourse—do not lend themselves to a world restricted to 280 characters at a time.

Regardless of the challenges of today’s means of communication, moderates still have a key role to play in challenging extremist views and in bringing a level of civility to the discourse. When it comes to engaging on the question of linguistic duality with the English-speaking majority, the lessons of past and present show that we must speak to issues that have long resonated with the majority, specifically:

- the centrality of linguistic duality to national unity, Canada’s history, our self-image and our place in the world;
- the continued presence, vitality and contributions of Francophone minority communities to Canada in general;

- the need for meaningful access for both linguistic groups to the opportunities and advantages that come with individual bilingualism; and
- the complementarity and mutually reinforcing potential of linguistic duality and Canada's broader cultural and linguistic diversity.

References

- ABLEY, Mark (2018). Beyond bilingualism: The *Official Languages Act* will soon turn fifty. Have we outgrown it? *The Walrus*.
- CALGARY ALBERTAN (1968, November 2). Cited in *La Presse*, "Sans dualité linguistique, le Canada pourrait cesser d'exister," p. 4.
- CHARBONNEAU, François (2015). "Un dialogue de sourds? Les arguments invoqués par les défenseurs et les détracteurs du bilinguisme dans l'espace public anglo-canadien", *Linguistic Minorities and Society = Minorités linguistiques et société*, n° 5, p. 13–57. doi.org/10.7202/1029106ar
- CHOINIÈRE, Frédéric, & Simon MADORE (2019). *Bi* – Bilinguisme, la grande utopie canadienne* [Documentary], Radio-Canada. <https://ici.tou.tv/bi-bilinguisme-la-grande-utopie-canadienne>
- DIX, Pauline. (1969, 16 February). Letter to the editor, *The Globe and Mail*, p. 6.
- DUNNING, C. (1929, November). Cited in *La Presse*, from newspaper clippings, Veniot Fonds, PANB.
- FRASER, Graham (2006). *Sorry I don't speak French: Confronting the Canadian crisis that won't go away*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- HAYDAY, Matthew (2015). *So they want us to learn French: Promoting and opposing bilingualism in English-Speaking Canada*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- HAYDAY, Matthew, & Raymond BLAKE (Eds.) (2016). *Celebrating Canada, volume 1: Holidays, national days, and the crafting of identities*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- IGARTUA, José (2006). *The other quiet revolution: National identities in English Canada, 1945-71*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- KITCHENER-WATERLOO THE RECORD (1968, November 2). Cited in *La Presse*, "Sans dualité linguistique, le Canada pourrait cesser d'exister," p. 4.
- LA PRESSE, (1969, February 1). "Le CTC appuie le bill c-120, mais redoute un excès possible de zèle," p. 4.
- MANION, Aileen V. (1969, July 14). Letter to the editor, *The Globe and Mail*, p. 6.
- MOOSE JAW DAILY TIMES (1930, 4 January). From newspaper clippings, Veniot Fonds, PANB.
- MOOSE JAW EVENING TIMES (1930, 4 January). From newspaper clippings, Veniot Fonds, PANB.
- OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES (OCOL) (2016). *What Canadians think about bilingualism and the Official Languages Act*. <https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/statistics/infographics/what-canadians-think-about-bilingualism-and-ola>

- OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES (OCOL) (2018). *Statistics on Canada's official languages*. <https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/statistics/index>
- PELLETIER, Gérard (1990). "1968: Language policy and the mood in Quebec", in Thomas S. Axworthy & Pierre Elliott Trudeau (Eds.), *Towards a just society: The Trudeau years*, (p. 207-225). New York: Viking.
- PITSULA, James (2013). *Keeping Canada British: The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Saskatchewan*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- PURDUE, A. P. (1969, February 16). Letter to the editor, *The Globe and Mail*, p. 6.
- REGINA DAILY STAR (1929, September 9). From newspaper clippings, Veniot Fonds, PANB.
- REGINA LEADER (1930, February 21). From newspaper clippings, Veniot Fonds, PANB.
- REGENSTREIF, Peter (1969, 22 February). "La majorité des Canadiens acceptent la thèse du bilinguisme", *La Presse*, p. 5.
- SHARP, Morgan (2018, November 19). Language issues overshadow talks between Doug Ford and François Legault, *Canada's National Observer*. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/11/19/news/language-issues-overshadow-talks-between-doug-ford-and-francois-legault> (accessed August 2020)
- STATISTICS CANADA (2019). *Focus on geography series, 2016 census*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-PR-Eng.cfm?TOPIC=5&LANG=Eng&GK=PR&GC=35>
- TALBOT, Robert J. (2014), *Moving beyond two solitudes: Constructing a dynamic and unifying Francophone/Anglophone relationship, 1916-1940*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Ottawa. https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30334/1/Talbot_Robert_2014_thesis.pdf
- TALBOT, Robert J. (2017). "Linguistic duality: A founding principle of Confederation?", *Canadian Historical Association Bulletin*, vol. 43, n° 2, p. 6-7.
- TALBOT, Robert J. (2018). "Bilingualism and biculturalism at the diamond jubilee of Confederation, 1927", in Raymond B. Blake & Matthew Hayday (Eds.), *Celebrating Canada, vol. 2: Commemorations, anniversaries, and national symbols* (p. 145-173), Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- THÉBERGE, Raymond, & Robert J. TALBOT (2019). "Beyond the numbers game: Official languages and the census, past and present", *Made to Measure: Statistics Canada @100, Canadian Issues = Thèmes canadiens*, (Spring/Summer 2019), p. 31-36.
- SEALE, Lewis (1968, October 24). "PM asks for probe into objections to civil service bilingualism", *The Globe and Mail*, p. 1.
- TRUDEAU, Pierre Elliott (1968). *Statement to the House of Commons on the introduction of the Official Languages Bill*, October 17. <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/primeministers/h4-4066-e.html>
- VANCOUVER SUN (1969, June 10). "Apportioning the blame", p. 4, cited in Igartua (2006), p. 220.
- WRIGHT, Donald A. (2005). *The professionalization of history in English Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Archival Materials

BOCK, William George (1929). Letter to Pierre Veniot, September 1929, Veniot Fonds, Public Archives of New Brunswick (PANB).

KERR, W.F. (1930). Letter to Pierre Veniot, 6 January, Veniot Fonds, PANB.

MURRAY, A.M. (1930, 8 March). Letter to Pierre Veniot, Veniot Fonds, PANB.

MURRAY, A.M. (1930, 20 March). Letter to Pierre Veniot, Veniot Fonds, PANB.

VENIOT, Pierre (1929). Letter to parliamentarians, 19 September, Veniot Fonds, PANB.

Keywords

bilingualism, history, Canada, populism, politics

Mots clés

bilinguisme, histoire, Canada, populisme, politiques

Correspondence

robertjames.talbot@clo-ocol.gc.ca