

A Final Note on Culture, Quebec Native Languages and the Quebec Question

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With Israel and Catalonia, Quebec is considered to be one of the success stories of language planning. These positive results can be explained by the conjunction of three factors, as highlighted by the contributions to this volume. French has always been spoken in Quebec by a significant number of people. These people have always been a majority over the whole of the continuous territory of the province. This territory is managed by a democratically appointed government having some jurisdiction over a wide range of issues. To some degree, these elements presuppose one another. The existence of a government rests on some generally continuous stretch of land – although examples of enclaves are given by Palestine and a few other administrations. The importance of territorial continuity is illustrated in the Canadian context by arguments around the perspective of an independent Quebec : Canadian Federalists refuse the physical separation of Atlantic Provinces from the rest of the country by a sovereign Quebec ; Quebec Sovereignist have always opposed the partition of the provincial territory. Territorial distribution influences the cohesion of a linguistic community. The bond between groups speaking the same language in distinct lands tends to loosen (as between French Canadian communities of Quebec origins and Quebecers themselves), and the languages themselves can differentiate to some degree (as with Portugal and Brazil Portuguese), even where a mere border separates the groups (as with Flemish and Dutch). Especially in those cases where they constitute a majority over a given territory, cohesive groups can in turn determine the agenda of the democratic government that represents them, as illustrated by the Quebec language laws themselves. The governmental, territorial and demographic factors made it possible to transform French from the language of use of a local majority into the official common public language of all Quebecers.

The conditions behind these transformations are not specific to the Quebec question, they also play a key role in other cases of linguistic conflicts. Of particular interest in this regard is the situation of Quebec Native languages. I cannot do justice here to the minute details of often extremely intricate and diverse cases (the interested reader will find a thorough discussion in Maurais 1996, from which I tacitly take much of the information presented below). Much more modestly, my intention is to show how the different political, economic, demographic parameters used in this book to analyse Quebec's language issue can provide insights into other problematic linguistic situations. The discussion will lead to the idea that ultimately, language debates reflect wider cultural considerations relating in particular to collective and personal identity.

The history of the Native populations of the Americas is a long narrative of decline and marginalisation. Aboriginals populations were decimated by epidemics of diseases like smallpox that were brought by the first European waves of explorers. They were further reduced by the wars and conflicts with the ever expanding colonial settlements. The remaining populations were pushed off from their lands, confined to reserves, stripped from political autonomy and restricted to the practice of their traditional economic activities. In every respect, Natives were considered

as incapable of determining their own destinies : in Canada, the Federal government was made the sole guarantor of Indians by the 1867 British North America Act.

This marginalisation was continued through a variety of assimilationist measures, notably in schooling. The education of Aboriginal children was entrusted to a number of religious congregations, with the goal of presenting them with elements of the White culture in the one of the colonial languages. Although the actions of these congregations might have had a positive influence on the preservation of Native languages through translation of the Scriptures and use in religious ceremonies, religious schooling had a notable negative impact. As elsewhere, the use of the Native languages in school was strictly forbidden and severely punished. In many cases, children were in residential schools away from their communities. Similarly, the adoption of Native children by White people was encouraged for some time ; as for adults, until recently, they lost their Indian status if they lived outside reserves, and so did women who married non-Natives.

Attitudes did not start to change until the nineteen sixties. A primary actor of this evolution was the Quebec government. Eager to demonstrate its openness towards culturally threatened communities, the provincial legislator recognised the difficult situation of the First Nations in a series of official declarations : In 1978, it expressed the rights for Native groups to determine the appropriate measures for cultural development and to get the support of the provincial government in this ; the preamble of the 1977 *French Language Charter* asserts the linguistic and cultural rights of the Native communities ; In 1983, a series of 15 principles adopted by the Quebec Cabinet recognised Native groups as distinct Nations with the rights to protect and promote their collective identity ; These rights along with that of governmental autonomy for the First Nations are reasserted in 1985 ; A statement towards a general policy in many ways similar to the 1978 declaration was issued in 1989, and the importance of economic development and political self-government was put forward in guidelines for negotiations proposed in 1998.

Much good will can be found in these declarations ; they however do not appear to be guided by a stable set of general principles, have often been put forward without much consultation of Native groups themselves, and have been accompanied by few precise action plans.

To be fair, precise action plans and consultation are difficult in these matters. The Native groups are primarily dependent on the Federal government, and have been reluctant to engage in discussions with yet another level of administration : it is not far-fetched to think that pressures on Indian bands have been exerted by Federal authorities not to enter into agreements that would have established the credibility of the government of a sovereigntist province. Also, a good interlocutor is not always easy to find : with powers limited in the best cases to those of city councils, Native administrations do not necessarily have the prestige to muster the agreement of all ; the apparent consensual tradition of decision-taking among First Nations has been claimed to render problematic the settlement of complex issues involving conflicting interests. It must also be mentioned that a uniform policy for all Nations would be highly inappropriate ; the situation of the Native groups varies so significantly that applying the same solutions to all could only make matters worse. This variation brought the Quebec government to favour negotiations with specific groups over particular situations, which have produced some tangible results.

The best illustration of a positive agreement is given by the first modern land claim settlement in Canada. In 1973, the courts recognised the territorial rights of Native Nations and called for the suspension of hydro-electric projects in the James Bay on Cree and Inuit territory. This recognition initiated intensive discussions leading to the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*. By this convention, the Native communities put themselves under the legal protection of the Government of Quebec, thus renouncing the authority of the federal law on Indians, and agreed to extinguish all territorial claims, following which the building of the dams planned by the government-controlled Hydro-Quebec could legally take place. In exchange, there was not only a confirmation of the rights to pursue traditional activities like fishing, hunting and trapping, but also a large monetary compensation of 225 million Canadian dollars given to the small communities. The compensation was not a simple hand out ; the sums were determined within the frame of detailed plans to establish Cree and Inuit schools, hospitals, and to further the environmental, social and economic situation of these groups. By devolving the administration of health and education to Native authorities, it made the communities responsible for their social development, giving them an opportunity to define their own social interventions and priorities.

A similar *North East Convention* was signed with the Naskapi in 1978. Negotiations with the Attikamekw and the Montagnais led in 1980 to the devolution by the provincial government of the administration of all cultural issues and educational institutions to these groups. Agreements with other Nations on a variety of similar issues were negotiated through the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties. The cultural and social concerns have extended to such areas as policing, which was in many cases transferred partly or entirely to Native organisations.

In essence, the Quebec government has sought to involve communities in the management of their own affairs at the local level, while retaining the prerogative to set the structures and norms on these matters. Schooling, health and social services as well as policing can and often is provided by the communities themselves ; the general framework for education, social and health affairs as well as justice remains that set by the provincial authorities. For instance, although it can be offered in the Native languages, schooling must ensure a working knowledge of French for the individuals to be able to contribute to the Quebec society and benefit from it if they so wish. The Quebec government is adamant that its authority constitutes the ultimate legal and political frame of reference, as does the integrity of the Quebec territory, and that frame is asserted as a precondition of any negotiations towards political autonomy of Native Nations.

This model is however evolving, as evidenced by recent developments to the James Bay Agreement. On November 23, 2001, an agreement aimed at furthering Cree economic autonomy was announced by the Great Chief Ted Moses. By this, the Quebec government guarantees to transfer three and a half billion Canadian dollars over the next fifty years to promote hydroelectric, forest and mining activities on Cree traditional territory. The norms and plans of exploitation of these resources are put under the authority of a joint board. A proportion of all jobs and business opportunities is agreed to benefit Cree people. At the same time, protected areas where projects are excluded or strictly limited are defined. The provincial government pursued the agreement in order to allow Hydro-Quebec to go ahead with the Eastman-Rupert project ; the deal also relieves it from a series of expensive suits that allege its lack of compliance with various aspects of the James Bay Agreement, a claim already accepted by various courts and that had been brought to the attention of the international community by Cree leaders through remarkably efficient and skilful communication campaigns raising sensitive environmental

concerns ; finally, the proposal of an attractive solution to Native problems establishes the credibility of a sovereigntist government, as compared in particular to the inability of the Federal administration to free itself from a paternalistic approach to the issue and come up with anything comparable. The Cree representatives were keen to sign such an agreement, as they felt the pressing need to provide a young and growing population - 60 % of Crees are under 25 - with economic opportunities that would help solve unemployment but also health, education and accommodation crises. Ending long years of judicial and political arguments, what Moses called the “peace of the Braves” provides a project of sustainable economic development. What’s more, it does so by treating the Native group as a full-fledged Nation, in its disposition and through the negotiation process lead by the highest executive representative of each group. Symbolically, politically and economically therefore, this agreement constitutes a model which might mark a new, constructive way to further the situation of minority group.

The increasing autonomy of Aboriginal and Inuit groups has an impact on their overall demographic, political and economic position. Taking into account the variable reliability of census figures, it can be estimated that the Native population of Quebec represent around one percent of the provincial population, with seventy thousand people from eleven Nations. The languages associated with the groups found in Quebec belong to three linguistic families, each sharing common characteristics and believed to have evolved from the same original language.

- The Eskimo-Aleut linguistic family is illustrated by two main varieties of inuktitut spoken by nearly 9 000 people in 14 towns and villages distributed over the large Arctic territory known as New Quebec. Because of the peculiar environment in which they live and the original culture that they have developed, the Inuit, as they are now called instead of the apparently derogatory term Eskimo, are generally distinguished from the Aboriginal Nations.
- The Iroquoian group include three Mohawk communities of nearly fifteen thousand people living South of Montreal, at the frontier of Quebec, Ontario and New York State. One Huron community of two thousand eight hundred people is also found in a suburb of Quebec city.
- The Algonquian family is represented by several dialectal varieties of Cree : Eastern Cree comprises twelve thousand five hundred people in nine reserves on the Quebec coast of the James Bay ; Naskapi is found in one community of seven hundred people South of the Ungava Bay ; Atikamekw account for nearly five thousand people distributed in three reserves North of the Saint-Maurice river in Central Quebec ; Montagnais, now increasingly known as Innus, inhabit ten communities adding up to more than thirteen thousand people, in the Saguenay area, on the North Shore of the Saint-Lawrence River, and up North near the Naskapi settlement. Belonging to Ojibwa branch of the Algonquian family, nearly eight thousand Algonquins live in nine reserves in the Abitibi region and in the Ottawa Valley. Micmac, found in three communities in the Gaspé Peninsula of four thousand three hundred Natives, Malecite, represented by less than five hundred people in one community near Rivière-du-loup, and Abenaki, with two thousand members in two communities in the Three-Rivers area, are also Algonquian groups.

The situation between these groups thus vary enormously in terms of numbers, although none of them is over fifteen thousand people. Most groups have a relatively high birth rate, with a majority of people under thirty years of age. To the exception of the Mohawk living South of Montreal and of the Huron near Quebec City, most Nations are established far from urban centres, in isolated, small communities that are in a majority of cases not connected by any roads to the outside world. Although all studies demonstrate that the material situation of Quebec Natives is the best in Canada, and therefore presumably in North America, this situation is far from satisfactory, as poverty is still the plight of most Amerindians, and in some communities more than others. While the groups that have signed the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* have enjoyed a steady economic development, and other communities closer to urban centres have put together a tourism industry, remote groups have had a hard time to come up with economically attractive projects.

The material setting of these communities have a direct connection with the vitality of their languages. Of particular importance is the mass of speakers and their geographical location. The degree of preservation of Native languages is in direct proportion with their isolation from White population centres, which is parallel to the role of isolation between Anglophone and Francophone communities in the survival of French in Quebec after the Conquest. Inuit, Cree and Montagnais have maintained themselves best, as evidenced by high percentages of knowledge of language and the numbers of monolingual speakers among different age groups. These languages are believed to stand the best chances of surviving as medium of everyday life, and their promotion is supported by a growing demography, as with the pre-nineteen sixties situation of French Quebec. For Natives, this demography ensures that the group can handle their own social and economic development, which is why agreements like the James Bay one and its recent developments are ideally suited to them. This is not to say that such administrative devolutions are without problems. It is often difficult for local authorities to define plans for their own communities and to find trained Native staff to carry on the mandates. In education for example, appropriate curricula and teaching staff are difficult to find. The isolation and size of each community and the differences between their needs and expectations makes the sharing of resources and experiences difficult. Nonetheless, the relative vitality of these languages and the promising profiles of the groups that speak them are causes for optimism.

The same optimistic perspective does not apply to all Native groups. When communities have a smaller population, assimilation is liable to occur, especially when they are close to White centres, as is thought to be currently happening with Mohawk communities ; where they are isolated or distributed over a large territory as with the Gwich'in language of North-West Territories, they often do not have the resources to attract sufficient economic development, define their own political agenda and manage their social services. Although these situations have often been conceived as a choice between either retaining one's culture with few if any economic opportunities or abandoning one's identity to enjoy a materially decent life, other options can be elaborated. While it is unlikely that threatened languages can be revived for common everyday use in all spheres of activity by each member of small communities, they may well be preserved in certain specialised domains such as local religious, cultural, and social events, on commercial signs, or in some aspects of children education, from which they can eventually be extended. The

support of such languages is not only a matter of imaginative planning from the community¹, it is also dependent on what prestige it can acquire among other groups. The decision of making Gwich'in one of the official languages of the North-West Territories is a spectacular example of status promotion ; another example is the idea that has been proposed to encourage the White population to learn at least some elements of these languages at school or through other means of popular education. This support from outside the community can only encourage its members to reclaim the use of the language in some spheres of activity, hopefully resulting in partially reversing the language shift.

Some other Native groups have lost their languages altogether. This is the case for the Huron community, whose language has been extinct for over a hundred years, due to the group's sustained contacts with Whites going back to the French regime, their proximity to French settlements, and the huge demographic losses they suffered through early epidemics and wars with other Native groups. The idea of reviving the Huron language has been considered at different moments, but is faced with a number of difficulties. Linguistically, the structure of the language to be brought back to life must be known through existing texts or otherwise well enough for it to be taught, and for its vocabulary to be adapted to the naming of new contemporary realities. Socially, people learning what is in effect a common foreign language can only happen if the new language serve a strong identitary project with official support, a significant number of speakers and use in several significant spheres of activity without the competition of any existing common language. These factors were behind the successful rebirth of Hebrew in Israel : a large number of citizens coming from different parts of the world did not necessarily have one language in common, the new language was to be used in all spheres of public activities, where it supported the project of building a State based on a religion transmitted in that very language, and that was therefore well known and in fact still practiced for specific purposes. Unfortunately, few extinct Native languages can benefit from so many favourable conditions. It is true that the Huron community appears to have a strong sense of collective identity, and that this identity was closely associated to the language. However, it is unlikely that reviving Huron gets much official support in a context where there are so many more pressing questions to be addressed ; it is not probable that it can serve as a medium of communication in many spheres outside the private domain ; even if a sufficient community of speakers could be recreated, they would feel the pressure to revert to the current common language of their community and the surrounding Quebec city area.

The reviving of dead languages, the support of threatened languages and the promotion of living minority languages raise more general questions. In the end, what should motivate language preservation and promotion? Considering the Quebec case, the philosopher Habermas² has expressed the view that minority cultures and languages should not be artificially preserved (the key word being "artificially"). And anyone will agree that whatever the patrimonial loss, groups should not be forced to maintain languages and cultures if they do not wish to do so. This view however misses the point that Quebecers were not forced from the outside as it were to keep a

¹ A good example of proposals toward such imaginative planning is provided by André Bourcier (1998. Language Planning for Gwich'in and Inuvialuit Communities. MS, Université Laval. <http://www.ciral.ulaval.ca/alx/texte>).

² In a conference given at the University of Copenhagen on September 23rd, 1997, reported by Jacques Caron (1999. « En marge de *trois essais sur l'insignifiance* de P. Vadeboncoeur». Tribune, 10, 17-25).

French culture and language; the language laws and other measures were called for by the bulk of the population, who still strongly support them. This collective will is driven by questions of identity ; although the identity of other communities is not necessarily defined in linguistic terms, to be a Quebecer is felt to be strongly tied to the knowledge and everyday practice of French. In those communities where a language is a strong factor of identity, the difficulty to use it in all spheres of public activities provokes insecurity in its speakers, with the self-depreciation of their languages and cultures. The impossibility to use that language results in alienation, the feeling of being submitted to foreign values one is never entirely familiar with. In both cases, the psychological impact on individuals and the community they constitute is shattering. The inability to assert one's identity through culture and language provokes well-documented feelings and attitudes of anguished inhibition. The resulting loss of creativity in all spheres of human activity debases not only the lives of these individuals, but also deprives everyone of their full contribution. It is because low language status and language loss robs everyone of the full contribution of each that languages must be preserved and promoted where individuals and communities for which they constitute a strong identity factor wish to do so. The will of those concerned is thus central as a justification of language planning, but also as its source: in the end, no one can better act on a language than the people who speak it.

Of course, whatever the collective will might be, the promotion of some languages should not be done at the expense of others. The originality of the Quebec linguistic measures lies in great part in their respect towards other groups in the province, as demonstrated by the numerous compromises built into the bills and the conciliatory approach to their application. This attitude is explained by the local democratic tradition, but also by the necessity to accommodate the powerful Anglophone minority group, and the concern for the continental and international image of the State. Having to answer to internal and external interests forces administrations to maintain the delicate balance of rights between the various groups in a multilingual environment.

The means of language promotion and preservation also raise questions. Are language preservation and promotion best realised through legislative instruments ? It is certainly the case that actions on language can be done without such recourse, but it is equally true that language planning can successfully use legal tools, as eloquently demonstrated by the Quebec case. Could French in Quebec have been supported through means other than legal? Could the objectives of maintaining French in Quebec and of bridging the economic gap with Anglophones be attained by implicit policies, or even no policy at all? After all, it is not unreasonable to think that the economic development that has characterised the rest of the Western world would have naturally benefited Quebec Francophones (the key words being "naturally"), thus enhancing the status of their language. But the linguistic stratification of Quebec before the nineteen sixties leads to the equally rational idea that those speaking French at home might have had to adopt English as the language of work and public life. Although there is a correlation between the economic and the cultural security of a group, the economic progression of a linguistic minority can in no way guarantee the promotion of their culture. Only an explicit official act appears to have been in a position to reverse a well established and deeply entrenched mode of social interaction into a new social order putting the majority in a better position, from where they can integrate new Quebecers. Only legislative measures appear to have the ability to maintain the prestige of French in Quebec, in view of the national, continental and world predominance of English.

Cultures are not simple adornments, no more than languages are mere tools of communication. Both tell the individuals what the world is made of, and how to act upon it. Deprived of their reference points, subjects are condemned to a world foreign that they can neither fully understand or efficiently act upon. As a result, their talent and opportunities are limited, making everybody poorer, not just psychologically, but also in very concrete economic terms. It is in its consideration for the central role of culture in all spheres of human life that the legislative answers proposed to the Quebec linguistic question constitute a notable model of language preservation and promotion.

References

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