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The Modern Language Journal, Vol. 82, No. 1. (Spring, 1998), pp. 95-102.

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Quebec French: Attitudes and Pedagogical Perspectives

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Teachers of French in the U.S. have either ignored, frowned upon, or ridiculed Quebec French. As a result, their students seldom have exposure to the variation of French spoken in *La Belle Province*, which is deplorable in view of the missed opportunities to learners of French interested in studying abroad. This article aims to review the arguments against stereotypes of Quebec French, to present a defense of *Québécois* as an acceptable and teachable form of the French language, and to attract the attention of teachers of French to the pedagogical opportunities of that dialect. Salient aspects of the article include the discussion of *joual*, *québécois*, and international French, and ideas about how to include Quebec French in a French curriculum.

RECENTLY, I ATTENDED AN ENTERTAINING session on Quebec French at a foreign language conference. The presentation was so appealing to the delegates that few of them showed up for the other meeting in French, which was scheduled to be held concurrently but was eventually cancelled for lack of interest. As would be expected, the presenter reviewed a large corpus of

Quebec French. He also isolated a lengthy list of Canadianisms in grammar, vocabulary, accent, and semantics, showing for each item the difference with Parisian French. His aim, apparently, was to comment on the pedagogical acceptability of *québécois*—a serious enough subject—but, as he delivered the seemingly objective material, it became clear that he was more bent on hilarity. He illustrated his comments with a series of slides carefully selected to feature the “bad French” of Quebec’s storefronts and signs. Then followed recordings of casual conversations, taken *sur le vif*, of lesser educated *Québécois*. Finally, he played

a few songs by well-known *chansonniers*, such as Félix Leclerc's "Variations sur le verbe donner."

As I left the room, I remembered attending a Modern Language Association meeting many years ago in Houston, Texas, where Quebec French had also been scrutinized. The subject has arisen at nearly every conference I have attended since then. Even worse, teachers attending these conferences have admitted openly to teaching their students to censure Quebec French. These confessions have led me to reflect on the distrust of American students toward Canadian French. Study abroad advisers recognize that few of their advisees want to visit, study, or live in Quebec. A second-year student whom I advised to spend his junior year at Laval told me bluntly, "I couldn't go there because, really, I don't understand anything they say." After many such responses over the years, anyone would agree that Quebec French has fallen prey to undeserved attacks.

It is annoying to discover that all the efforts to present and explain the issues involving Quebec French over the past three decades have not yet produced a change of attitudes. The books and articles on the subject by Canadian, French, and American scholars apparently had little or no impact.¹ Sometimes it appears that the derision of Quebec French has in fact increased. As a teacher of French, I feel a strong need to reflect on the value of Quebec French in order to form an opinion about whether and how I should use it, if only to challenge my students. In brief, I wish to address a few of the questions that remained unasked at the language conferences: Is a dialect such as Quebec French a normal phenomenon? Are its detractors always fair? What exactly is the linguistic situation in Quebec? What new attitudes toward Quebec French would help correct the misconceptions of the past?

First of all, North Americans who decry Quebec French should not do so unless and until they have probed their own vernacular. Indeed, the moment that European languages were imported into the Americas, they became the object of an irreversible adaptation, especially because European and indigenous communities felt that it was necessary to remodel those instruments to fit their new needs. French was no exception.² The Portuguese language experienced transformations in Brazil, as did Spanish in Latin America and English in North America. Furthermore, European languages have interacted with African and native tongues throughout the American colonies to form pidgins and patois. For instance, *papiamentu* in the Caribbean islands of Aruba and

Curaçao derives from the encounter of three major colonial languages: Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch. It is well-known today that Antillean creoles resulted from various interactions of Portuguese, French, Spanish, and English with African and indigenous tongues.³

The more recent "franglais" phenomenon, an object of curiosity since René Etiemble coined the term 30 years ago, is threatening to escalate into a veritable dialect,⁴ and no one knows whether the "Spanglish" of Puerto Rico and Mexico will remain a fad or will continue to grow (Ortiz, 1992). In fact, all amalgamations of human groups develop linguistic strategies that involve hybridization of languages and cultures. As Orkin (1971) puts it, this has been "the destiny" of English, Spanish, and French in the Americas (p. 32).

Another point that can be made against the critics of Quebec French concerns the fundamental question of honesty: How much knowledge of a language would justify censuring other speakers? Those who confer this authority upon themselves should make certain that at least an adequate knowledge of the subject informs their criticism. Often, however, complaints that Quebec French is incomprehensible come from individuals who are not equipped to debate dialectal forms of French because they do not possess adequate mastery of the standard and dialectal norms. Their criticism derives not from personal observation or fact, but from widespread prejudices.

Furthermore, ignorance of the French language often leads to superficial judgments about Quebec French. For instance, a common tendency is to berate Quebec French for its apparent overabundance of anglicisms, the charge being that under the effacing effect of so many English words, the language has lost its identity. It would appear, in some distorted way, that English is the dominant language in the province of Quebec and that an emerging form of "franglais," one which is more American than British, has taken the place of French as the uniform speech of the *Québécois* people. But anyone knowledgeable enough to sort out the facts realizes that anglicisms are not the main ingredients of *québécois*. There are also archaisms, which signal unequivocally the continuation between Hélixagone and Quebec French. In Orkin's (1971) words,

All languages cut off from the parent stock by accident of history display two major tendencies. On the one hand, they are archaic, retaining words, pronunciations and idioms long since disappeared from the mother tongue. On the other hand, they are innovative; in phonetics, morphology, and syntax they offer

new forms unknown to the linguistic family from which they have separated. (p. 22)

It is in the “innovatory” phase that Canadian French acquired English forms, an unimportant process that by no means affects the “Frenchness” of Quebec speech. Besides, it is the archaisms that truly define *québécois*. They constitute the very source from which all French dialects must have drawn, a rich heritage of Latin-derived and original words that for the most part Parisian French has dismissed too easily in favor of English borrowings (Rousseau, 1971). The fact that anglicisms have not eroded the French foundation of the Quebec dialect has been emphasized by Meney (1994) who, in a recent article, questions whether all the terms previously classified as anglicisms truly are. Though he admits that English has penetrated every aspect of *québécois*, he cautions that many words and idioms thought to have originally come from English may, in fact, derive from 17th-century French, Belgian, Swiss, Breton, Norman, “colonial,” popular, or professional French. If this is indeed the case, the sheer number of anglicisms in *québécois* would be extremely limited.

Critics of Canadian French seem to promote the myth that the Quebec language community forms a monolith and that, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, education, and occupation, all *Québécois* speak the same corrupted, unintelligible dialect of French. The reality is that different levels of speech exist in all language groups. Researchers and French speakers familiar with the linguistic situation of the Canadian province seem to agree that three levels of French are identifiable in the cultural landscape of Quebec: *joual*, Quebec French, and international French.

The originality of *joual* lies in its reticence toward the sound patterns and structures of Hexagonal French. Having retained the patterns of 17th-century French, *joual* is nothing more than an archaic form of French. It is not an autonomous language, not a patois (unless by this one means a mixture of 17th-century dialects from different parts of France), not a creole, such as Haitian Creole; rather, it is a form of French that has been traced back mainly to Northern and Central France (see Mougéon & Beniak, 1994).⁵ In the past 2½ centuries, it has not undergone significant change, whereas the rest of the Quebec speech community has generated the new system of norms that forms the basis of *québécois* today.

It is unnecessary to describe the two systems in the nonanalytical context of these remarks. One should note, however, that important characteris-

tics in the areas of phonetics, morphology, and semantics set the *québécois* and *joual* idioms apart. For instance, noticeable distinctions occur in the sound patterns of the two systems. A very common example of the different sound patterns is the tendency in *joual* to pronounce the diphthong *oi* as *oé* or *ouè*. Therefore, the *joual* words pronounced, *moé*, *toé*, *souèr*, *cibouère*, and *un nouèr* would translate as *moi*, *toi*, *soir*, *ciboire*, and *un noir* in *québécois*. Another significant example in grammar is the suppression in *joual* of French conjugation rules, as in *J'vous payerons ça un jour* (I will pay you back one day). Sharper distinctions exist in the use of vocabulary, because many words of *joual* have long disappeared outside its territory, for example, words such as *obstineux* (têtu), *clopeux* (boiteux), *bacaisse* (grosse), and *placoter* (bavarder). It is in this area that *québécois* has separated most consistently from *joual*.

However, the fundamental distinction between these two idioms is that *québécois* observes a more identifiable set of rules and that it remains closer to the mother tongue than does *joual*. Its structures show a clear familiarity with those of modern Hexagonal French. Its intrinsic norms have by no means moved it away from its base. It highlights an accent that, distinct as it is, displays all the features of international French phonetics. For all the exaggerated claims about differences between the two systems, Quebec French possesses only a few sounds unfamiliar to francophones outside Canada, which explains why they find it easy to understand (Orkin, 1971). Although this is not the place to provide a comparison of the two phonologies, it is important to note that the *québécois* accent is overwhelmingly French. The differences, such as the tendency in *québécois* to change nonsibilant sounds into sibilants, are persistent, but these details present no real obstacle to communication with other francophones.

One must admit that some influence of *joual* on *québécois* is evident. Both vernaculars draw from a lexical base replete with archaisms and anglicisms. Both share some features of phonology. Both have experienced the impact of history. But in all these aspects, *joual* is extreme whereas Quebec French is moderate. Consequently, *joual* finds itself at a greater linguistic and cultural distance from Hexagonal French, whereas *québécois* sits comfortably between the two. What separates *québécois* from *joual* is its proximity to Hexagonal French. In addition, *joual* occupies the low end of Quebec's dialectal scale because its literary tradition dates back only to the 1970s, with writers such as Antonine Maillet. Considering that the

Québécois have traditionally written in international or in Quebec French, *joual* has developed mainly as an oral phenomenon. As a result, the status of *joual* is not comparable to that of Quebec French. The latter is a more cultivated and subdued dialect; the former is a popular idiom.

These remarks are offered without any presumption of exhaustive scrutiny because the dialectal differentiations under review are endless. The point of the above remarks is that if *joual*, *québécois*, and Hexagonal French possess their own characters, they are, nevertheless, the same language, in that they are in many respects mutually intelligible and because they share several areas of near-perfect conformity, particularly in matters of articulation and semantics. According to Martinet (1970), "nous devons poser . . . qu'on a affaire à une seule langue tant que la communication est effectivement assurée" (as long as effective communication occurs between two systems, we must assume . . . that they are two forms of the same language). On the other hand, he continues to explain that a language distinct from French is at play if it does not permit communication with another francophone person. For Martinet, *québécois* is French because, as he observes, "un Français comprend, en général, un *Québécois*" (In general, a speaker of Hexagonal French understands a *Québécois*) (p. 147). In this sense, *joual*, *québécois*, and Hexagonal French exist on a continuum.

Another myth this author wishes to dispel is that sharp sociolinguistic distinctions can be made among these varieties of French based solely on region and social class. Thus, for example, it is not true that *joual* is limited to the rural areas, that Quebec French is always spoken in the cities, and that Parisian French is used only by the upper class. The reality is that many speakers switch routinely from one to the other of these vehicles in order to adapt to speech situations that sometimes overlap. If we admit that there exist three levels of French in Quebec, then we must also accept that the dynamics involved make for a more complex linguistic situation than an uninformed observer might think.

Martinet (1970) points out that "la plupart des hommes sont susceptibles d'employer, selon les situations, des formes assez divergentes d'une même langue" (most people are likely to use divergent forms of the same language to adapt to different social situations) (p. 149). This observation could well apply to the *Québécois* community. The college student, for instance, who takes a vacation to Gaspésie, where he or she uses words such as "pantoute" and "il mouille," will

probably revert to using "pas du tout" and "il pleut" in literature class upon returning to the university. In contrast, the term "un char" may go unchecked in any speech situation because it is an accepted canadianism. In addition, some speakers deliberately opt against *joual*, although they may be completely comfortable with it. If it is true that some individuals in Quebec prefer Parisian French, the majority of *Québécois* prefer Quebec French, a dialect that most francophones find no harder to understand than the other varieties of French that have emerged elsewhere in the world.

These remarks are not meant to discount the significance of *joual*, which is by no means an object of shame to the *Québécois*. On the contrary, *joual*'s position is solid and its widespread use in the province of Quebec testifies to its dynamism. The fact that it has coexisted for so long with international French has helped to reinforce its acceptability. If anything, the use of *joual* is ambivalent, because it serves as both a simple medium of communication and as a symbol of cultural identity, therefore, as an instrument that is not primarily linguistic. Indeed, as the repository of their cultural heritage, *joual* is the rallying force by which the *Québécois* affirm their "otherness." The use of *joual* is often a conscious, political act, and on that score, the *Québécois* see it as a valuable instrument, especially in view of the nationalistic sentiments of recent times. Maillet, author of the controversial work *Pélagie la-Charrette* (which won the Prix Goncourt in 1979), written almost entirely in *joual*, stated her predilection for *joual* in unambiguous terms at the New York Modern Language Association Convention in 1983: "I had something to say and I did not care to have it said for me by someone else, nor did I want to say it with other people's words. I wanted to say it myself, in my own words."

The new generations of *Québécois* are not as eager to "purge" their dialect as their elders have been. Dulong, in the preface of his *Dictionnaire des canadianismes* (1989), deplores "les anathèmes prononcés par les puristes et redresseurs de la langue qui n'ont pas manqué durant toutes ces années de la Révolution tranquille" (the anathemas pronounced by purists and fanatics of language norms who have not been in short supply during the years of the "Quiet Revolution") (p. vii). In *Speak White* (1974) and in *Deffence et illustration de la langue québécoise* (1979), the poet Michèle Lalonde, who may prove to be the speaker for her generation, shows her utmost distress over the censorship inflicted on her vernacular.

The invariably negative reactions to *joual* and

to Quebec French are the result of historical indifference to the Canadian francophone community by the rest of the francophone world. The history of that community abounds with examples of tenacity in the face of oppression and abandonment, dating back to Samuel de Champlain. Voltaire's mockery of Quebec as a wilderness inhabited by savages (1755/1970, p. 499) has haunted the French colony for many years, even though French settlements in Canada would hold out long enough to show posterity that a great *philosophe* does not always have the last word. However, French Canadian society has not yet defeated Voltaire's legacy of sarcastic, belittling indifference. Rejected by France in 1763 in favor of the Caribbean colonies and disempowered by the British North America Act of 1867, which attributed most of the political power over Quebec to the Queen of England and to the Canadian federal government (Brunet, Frégault, & Trudel, 1952), Quebec may have seemed to the rest of the world to be undeserving of approbation. This history explains in part the attacks on its idiosyncrasies.

France, too, has its *argots* and dialects that resulted from the country's history of invasions and foreign acquisitions. Moreover, the French language is not uniform throughout the world. Each area adapts it to its own needs—fauna, flora, social environment, cultural concerns, and so forth. Today, people in more than 50 areas around the world speak versions of French imbued with their own particularities; Quebec is only one such area.

It is difficult to understand why Quebec French has been singled out when all other varieties of French, whether inside or outside France, present obvious particularities. Whether in grammar, vocabulary, accent, or semantics, what matters is not the details of differences between *québécois* and Hexagonal French, but the fact that those differences do not present an obstacle to communication between the two communities. Does it matter that the French tend to use *d'autres* whereas the *Québécois* tend to use *de d'autres*? The only difficulty with Quebec French lies in the learner's attitude and willingness to learn the particularities of that dialect.

To offer a different perspective, North Americans pronounce the "*s-c-h*" of "schedule" as *sk*, but the British pronounce it *sch*. The former use the word "subway" to designate the train system that runs underground, whereas the British use the word "underground." Hundreds of similar differences have been noted by linguists (Bryson, 1990). The spoken accents of British and American English may be farther apart than those of Quebec

and continental French. Are the two anglophone communities unable to communicate because of these differences? Not at all. On the contrary, American contributions to English have made the language richer and more effective as a communication tool. English-speaking communities have not suppressed each other. Today millions of people across the continents communicate without anguish in a variety of English dialects, making English the most successful language of our time (Bryson, 1990).

This is not to say that the French language should be transformed into a horrible *baragouin* devoid of rule or structure. Rather, this author argues that unless every dialect of French is accepted as a system of norms akin to those of Parisian French (and therefore inseparable from the mother tongue), French speakers will defeat the purpose of what a universal language is expected to be: a tool of communication that is adapted to regional needs but also integrative of those regionalisms so as to permit mutual understanding among different nations and cultures. As long as the language continues to spread throughout the world and many different communities adopt it as their own, it will be impossible for the same version of French to remain the only norm, unless it admits some flexibility. In Rousseau's (1971) words,

Le français parlé doit être une langue ouverte collectivement par toute la communauté francophone, non par une métropole qui la défend comme une chasse gardée et pour qui le reste du monde est une vaste colonie. (pp. 5–6) (Spoken French must be the result of a collective effort involving the entire francophone community, not just a metropolis that defends the language like its exclusive domain and for which the rest of the world is a vast colony.)

The current insistence on standardization—a goal that seems more realistic today in view of the extraordinary progress of telecommunication—relies on the myth that regional variations of French can indeed be suppressed despite evidence that they are growing stronger every day and that they continue to serve the needs of their speech communities. Such regional variations are not irrelevant deviations from the norm, but dynamic communication tools critical to their environment in the same way that Hexagonal French is essential to France. It is not Quebec French that needs to be rectified but the attitudes toward it, for Quebec French is not only acceptable, it is also desirable.

To the question most persistent in the minds of French teachers—"Should *québécois* be taught in the French class?"—the answer should be an

echoing "Yes." To combat the anti-Quebec stereotypes, no swifter remedy exists than a formal recognition of *La Belle Province* in the classroom. Its culture and language will only gain acceptance once the educated public is exposed to them. Any unfamiliar language sounds strange, especially when burdened with adverse criticism. Consequently, a program aimed at familiarizing students with *le parler québécois* should be the first step toward restoring its legitimacy.

This being said, however, concerns about what constitute relevant goals in teaching Quebec French should also be addressed. In this regard, one should keep in mind that the Quebec schools do not teach *joual*. *Québécois* students use and understand the different varieties of French available to them, as do the writers, journalists, radio and television reporters, and the educated francophone residents of Canada. Therefore, a language program that includes Quebec French must focus on listening, reading, and, to a lesser extent, speaking. Teaching students to speak Quebec French requires that they have more than a vague interest in it, because it contains words and expressions that are so frequent that they must be learned. For example, the French word for blueberry is "myrtille," but in Quebec one should ask for a "tarte aux bleuets" because the word "myrtille" is seldom used.⁶ Although it is obviously impossible to teach any dialect as exhaustively as the mother tongue, it is possible to present the common features of a dialect as well as any vocabulary which would be needed for students to function in Quebec.

The best approach is one that involves delaying the introduction of dialects until the college years, ideally after sufficient language skills have been attained. At any rate, it would not be appropriate to teach dialects at the early stages of a language program. Upon mastering the basic structures of French grammar, students are ready to be exposed to the *Québécois* language and culture. The best level for this introduction appears to be the fourth semester of college, preferably in a reading and conversation class. So far, no real study exists that could inform these comments. However, several textbooks offer excellent models explaining how *québécois* could be presented in a French class, among them *Personnages* by Oates and Dubois (1995). This text is exemplary because it contains the perfect blend of vocabulary and dialogue needed to capture the essence of francophone cultures. The best features of the book are the audio and video materials. One section of the text concerns Quebec. In it, students are introduced to the geography, culture, and

language of the province. Two dialogues are included in the cassette. They present characters whose stories take place in Gaspé. While listening to, answering questions about, and writing compositions about these characters, students accumulate a considerable amount of information on Quebec. In addition, the videocassette presents the geographic area with a very elegant and richly illustrated text, offering more learning opportunities on the subject.

At the fourth semester of college level, the study of language through literature can be extremely useful as well. In this context, literature can serve as both a means and a goal, particularly in light of the increasing significance of literary works in Quebec French and in *joual*.⁷ However, only more accessible texts such as those by Gabrielle Roy or Yves Thériault, or short stories by the new wave of Quebec writers, would be recommended for students at this level.⁸ The most useful teaching tool would be an anthology of interesting texts from Quebec and other francophone areas that introduces similarities and differences in various aspects of language and culture. The ideal anthology would include in the margins of the text a dialectal vocabulary with annotations. Pending the publication of such an anthology, the best approach for instructors would be to adapt anthologies presently in use in Canada, such as Thério's (1988) *Conteurs québécois* or Tougas' (1974) *La littérature canadienne-française*.

The instructor's ultimate goal would be to help students appreciate diversity as a source of enrichment and to value variations in language as a part of the human experience. As the most multicultural of disciplines, language offers an ideal opportunity to address the issue of cultural sensitivity in modern societies. Too often that opportunity is overlooked.

Languages will always generate dialects and these dialects will continue to demand attention because they provide insight into the original system of a given language and help students learn it better. In this sense, Quebec French is very much a part of the French language, an important part that accounts, to some extent, for the language's richness and beauty. For these reasons, teachers and students of French cannot entirely neglect it. Therefore, a change of attitude is in order. As Vigneault used to sing,

*si on voulait danser sur ma musique
on finirait par y trouver des pas*
(if they wanted to dance to my music,
they'd manage to find the right steps.)
(*Tam ti di lam*, 1962)

NOTES

¹ For a historical account of attitudes toward Canadian French, see Orkin's (1971), *Speaking Canadian French: An Informed Account of the French Language in Canada*. In the opening chapter, Orkin points out that, from C.-F. de Volnay's 1803 characterization of Canadian French as "un français passable" to the 1960 campaign of the Office de la Langue Française "to improve standards of spoken and written French throughout the province," Quebec French has suffered a long series of attacks by French Canadian purists. However, it ultimately gained status through the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s and '70s (pp. 11–17).

² The fact, widely admitted among linguists, that "languages inevitably change and nothing can be done about it" (Farb, 1973, p. 332), is evident everywhere in the world. The colonial languages imported to North America have undergone major alterations. Conklin and Lourie (1983) analyze this process and show its inevitability (pp. 3–32, 155–222).

³ A persistent theory on the origin of creoles is that they all derive from a Portuguese lingua franca. For an interesting discussion on the subject, see Taylor (1963).

⁴ See Etienne's (1991), *Parlez-vous franglais?* Farb (1973) noticed that despite "the onslaught" of American English "resulting from a Post-World-War II campaign, a large number [italics added] of words, such as 'blugines,' 'le week-end,' 'le snacke barre,' are endured so long as they are pronounced in French" (p. 332).

⁵ The author of these lines is well aware of the controversy surrounding the definition of *joual*. Ossipov (1994), quoting Gauvin and Santerre, among others, notes that some linguists consider *joual* neither a dialect nor even a level of language. Her own understanding of *joual* is that "the term has come to refer to the *Québécois* dialect in general" (p. 945). These opinions do not change the fact that the very existence of the term *joual* signals an undeniable reality: that it is a subvariety of *québécois* that may not lend itself to a clear-cut definition but which is, nevertheless, easily identified by the *Québécois* themselves.

⁶ This comment may not conform to Valdman's (1996) proposition that "l'enseignement du FLE [français langue étrangère] . . . requiert . . . que l'on fasse écouter les voix réelles de la francophonie aux apprenants sans toutefois—et j'insiste là-dessus—leur demander de les imiter [italics

added]" (The teaching of French as a foreign language . . . requires . . . that one exhibit the real voices of francophonie to the learners without—and I insist—asking them to pattern their own oral skills after these voices) (p. 2). The reputation of Professor Valdman for the defense of cultural identities notwithstanding, his assertion suggests, in a sense, the supremacy of Hexagonal French over what he calls "les voix réelles de la francophonie" (p. 2). The author of this article believes that the imitation of Quebec French cannot be promoted because it would be impractical and would invite too much confusion, not because it is altogether undesirable as a goal.

⁷ In two recent articles, Ossipov (1994) and Abrate (1994) provide some very useful advice on the teaching of Quebec literature.

⁸ For instance, excerpts from Gabrielle Roy's (1979) *Cet été qui chantait* and Yves Thériault's (1981) *Agaguk*.

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