

The language hurdle

While more immigrants to Québec are using French, the English language continues to make inroads.

(Second of a two-part series on Québec's demographic mutation.)

Simon Langlois

International immigrants to Québec tend to use their mother tongue to a greater degree than elsewhere in Canada. A possible explanation is that many are reluctant to integrate into either the French-speaking community, which is perceived as a minority in Canada, or the English-speaking community, a minority in Québec.

But English still continues to attract immigrants to Québec, even those who attend French schools. Language transfers toward English are more numerous than those toward French. In 1991, the number of persons using English as their language of communication was two per cent in excess of the number claiming English as mother tongue, another indication of how immigrants are attracted by the English language.

Since enactment of Québec's language laws, immigrants with school-age children appear more inclined to turn to French. Such laws, however, have had less effect on immigrants who arrive as adults and are largely inclined to adopt English.

Québec's demographic weight in Canada is declining, essentially for two reasons: first, the net migratory loss between 1961 and 1984; second, Canada was more liberal in terms of immigration — 260,000 arrivals per year — than Québec, which *revised* fixed quotas lower than its percentage of the Canadian population.

Québec's regions, meanwhile, are being increasingly deserted in favor of urban centers in general and of Montréal in particular. Québec now is one of the most urbanized societies of the western world.

The vast majority of immigrants to Québec also choose the Montréal region as home, a trend that has grown over the past 15 years. From 83 per cent in 1980, the proportion climbed to 90 last year. Montréal's French-speaking population thus is called upon, in effect, to shoulder the

responsibility of integrating the newcomers, particularly in schools. Montréal has become a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic city where the proportion of old-stock French-speaking Québécois is diminishing. The phenomenon is heightened by a tendency of the French-speaking middle class to move from the core city to the suburbs.

Hence a chasm is developing between Montréal and the rest of Québec, whose linguistic and ethnic composition has changed little.

In common with certain states of Northern Europe, Québec has begun to shape a population policy. Under an administrative deal with the Government of Canada known as the Couture-Cullen agreement, Québec has a voice in the selection of certain immigrants, whom it endeavors to integrate into the French-speaking majority. Further powers in the area of immigration are perceived as a key element in development of a French society. That explains why Québec sought, unsuccessfully, to expand such powers during recent constitutional negotiations.

Language laws giving French a priority status and making it compulsory for international immigrants to send their children to French elementary and high schools — but not colleges or universities — ought not to be interpreted as the nervous reflex of a defensive minority unable to reproduce itself adequately. On the contrary, such laws and regulations reflect a desire to bring newcomers into the French-speaking mainstream. Is it abnormal that a society would seek to give itself a common language with a view to fostering social integration? Seen in that light, the French language serves as a means of integrating newcomers into a society which, in exchange, is transforming itself to adjust to their presence instead of condemning them to the marginality that was the lot of predecessors during the '50s. For decades,

Québec was criticized for its coolness toward immigrants. Is it now to be criticized because it wants to integrate them?

Generally speaking, Québec's demographic perspective today inspires more optimism than it did five years ago. In the short term, however, the uncertainty of English-speaking Québécois regarding their future remains a problem. Young members of that minority are mobile and many leave Québec once they have completed their studies. But polls suggest their departure is motivated more by the anemic state of the job market than by the existence of language laws. ■

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QT SCOREBOARD

Here's how our crystal ball fared in June.

Dead Right

• Premier Daniel Johnson confirmed that the government would financially support the bid of the Québec Urban Community for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

• Johnson also took the leap into the great unknown with the general election call we said would come in July.

Dead Wrong

• Ovide Mercredi made it back to power as chief of the Assembly of First Nations. Konrad Siour, a Québec native leader who was seen as a serious challenger, was a first-ballot also-ran.