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## “QUALITY OF LANGUAGE”: THE CHANGING FACE OF QUEBEC PRESCRIPTIVISM

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THE FIRST WORD OF THIS PAPER’S TITLE, “Quality,” is intended to be ironic in the sense of echoic mention proposed in Sperber and Wilson 1981. As a linguist, I don’t believe any one kind of language to be intrinsically superior to another, and yet I must recognize that my perspective as a scholar often does not jibe with that of the non-linguist speaker. This disconnect is not a recent discovery. Bloomfield 1927 reported that even illiterate speakers of Menomini thought in terms of “good” and “bad” exemplars of their language. Many other instances from domains as diverse as language planning (cf. Thomas 1991:215–25) and newspaper columns treating controversial usages suggest that native speakers do indeed have, at the very least, a vague awareness of prescriptivism, regardless of their level of schooling.

A contention of this paper is that even non-variationist “mainstream” linguistics needs to take into account a francophone Quebecer’s prescriptive instincts, in order to account for the co-existence of and tension between popular and official usage. (By “non-variationist” I don’t mean an approach that rejects variation, but rather one that does not entail a specifically variationist framework.) Before looking at the details of the Quebec situation, I will provide two definitions. By “prescriptivism,” I mean simply any approach which recommends or mandates the usage or avoidance of linguistic units in a particular context or register, as opposed to an empirical or descriptive approach. Linguists often fail to distinguish between this broad sense of prescriptivism and a sub-type of it, “purism,” which not only prescribes a usage X but also dismisses a competing usage Y as intrinsically wrong. In this paper “prescriptivism” by itself denotes the broader, non-dismissive type. “Purism” will always entail condemnation of the non-standard.

Our discipline often adopts a puristic attitude towards prescriptivism, as in an introductory linguistics class, where students are usually told that describing is always preferable to prescribing. Prescriptivism is condemned as something which is not only unscientific, to be avoided at all costs in one’s work, but also as something which is socially harmful, as when some American social workers believed Black English speakers who resisted standard English to be mentally deficient (Henningson 1989:34–35). Yet, as a 1997 debate on *Linguist List* showed,<sup>1</sup> prescriptivism is for many of us more than just something to avoid while analyzing language. While acknowledging that prescriptivism can have both academically and socially harmful effects, several contributors asserted that to dismiss all types of it prevents

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<sup>1</sup> <http://linguistlist.org/issues/8/8-1764.html>, <http://linguistlist.org/issues/8/8-1768.html>,  
<http://linguistlist.org/issues/8/8-1774.html>

us from understanding many facets of native speakers' behavior. A prescriptivist approach obviously makes sense in areas such as first-language literacy education as well as all aspects of second-language teaching, and even in linguistics instruction given in and about a second language, since the students may lack the native-like knowledge required for analysis. Prescriptivism, then, is at times appropriate.

In the next section, I will sketch the historical background of Quebec prescriptivism, followed by a discussion of how one contemporary analyst views the "language question" from the standpoint of language planning. I will conclude with an outsider's take on how Quebec prescriptivism has evolved.

1. A VERY SCHEMATIC HISTORY. To put it cryptically, attitudes toward Quebec French (henceforth QF) have evolved from an intemperate purism to a reflective, nuanced prescriptivism. This section attempts to explain this evolution via a historical sketch based on Leclerc 2008 and Poirier 2006. According to sporadic descriptions of the time, the language spoken during the era of New France (1534–1763) was fairly homogenous, a composite of the French spoken in western provinces like Normandy and Poitou. Poirier insists, contra Barbaud 1984, that it was definitely not a patois, in the sense of a local, stigmatized variety. He contends that even then there was competition between the Parisian French of the administration and the *habitants'* rural French. The latter prevailed because the administrators were not permanent residents in the colony and obviously were no longer a force after the Conquest.

With the fall of New France in 1760, the English at first attempted quick assimilation of the conquered. Such a policy proved impossible and was reversed within just over a decade. In an attempt to secure the Canadians' loyalty in the face of growing discontent from the 13 colonies to the south, the British passed the Quebec Act of 1774. It restored the traditional seigneurial system in lands settled before the Conquest, guaranteed the right to practice Catholicism, and reinstated the French civil law code. Even though it said nothing about language, its concessions to the French-Canadians were clearly instrumental in keeping their language alive.

In 1791, the Constitution Act divided the colony into a western part, Upper Canada, largely populated with United Empire Loyalists who had fled the American Revolution, and an eastern part, Lower Canada, largely francophone. This division did little to calm tensions between the English and French in Lower Canada, where francophones were prohibited from taking positions in the civil service, trade and commerce were almost entirely in the hands of the English, and government-funded schools were to be under Anglican control, and so were massively boycotted and even sometimes burned down by the Canadians, who consequently saw their illiteracy rate climb to 96 percent in 1810.

French-Canadian resentment of English domination reached a peak in 1837, when the *patriote* Louis-Joseph Papineau led a rebellion which was swiftly and bloodily put down. The British government commissioned Lord Durham to produce a report which recommended reunification of the Canadas and submersion of the French into English culture via massive anglophone immigration into what had been Lower Canada. The Act of Union of 1840 created a single assembly and was the first legislation to declare English as the sole

official language of the colony. Thanks largely to the efforts of the politician Louis-Hyppolite Lafontaine to have French given at least some recognition in the Assembly, as of 1849 all laws had to be officially adopted in both languages. Such a bare-bones official status for French lasted until the late 1960s.

Concentrated in urban centers, the English in Quebec enjoyed an economic boom in the mid-nineteenth century, while the French were mostly confined to the land, as “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” to quote Trollope (1862:48). Between 1840 and 1930, largely because little arable land was left, French Quebec lost five to ten percent of its population *each year* to emigration, mainly to the U.S. The English, on the other hand, poured into Montreal, making it a predominantly anglophone city between 1831 and 1865. Quebec City, today massively francophone, had over 40 percent non-francophone inhabitants in the mid-nineteenth century.

Poirier (2006:82–83) contends that linguistic purism in Quebec goes back only to the 1840s. Documentary evidence suggests that, until that decade, the *habitants* were proud of their language and culture, which they identified as Canadian rather than French. In a gesture that seems quite ironic today, the Société St-Jean Baptiste in 1834 proposed the maple leaf as their emblem. For Poirier, the French-Canadians’ linguistic insecurity arose only with the failure of the 1837 rebellion and the ensuing English determination to assimilate them. The puristic condemnation of their language began with a manual of correction by an American clergyman, Thomas Maguire, and soon spread to the French-Canadian elite, who believed that only by adopting Parisian norms could they ensure respect and recognition for their language by the English. This social downgrading of Canadian French and adulation of an idealized Parisian model would continue until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s.

The nineteenth century demographic shifts also weighed heavily against French. As francophones began migrating to Montreal from the impoverished countryside, the anglophone numerical superiority disappeared but the Anglophones’ socio-economic and linguistic dominance continued. French-Canadians in Montreal, whether of the elite or the working-class, were forced to learn English for their economic survival, a one-way bilingualism that has been reversed only in the past two decades. This diglossia meant that urban French-Canadians borrowed extensively from English, a factor that fed the francophone intelligentsia’s reaction against all forms of *joual*, everyday, low-status street French. The campaigns against anglicisms, coupled with the above-mentioned promotion of Parisian French as norm, created among francophones a deep-seated linguistic insecurity that surfaces even today, although it has considerably diminished.

I have dwelt on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it is difficult to understand today’s francophone linguistic assertiveness without knowing what led up to it. The second-class status of French in Quebec and francophone resignation to it remained constant until the 1960s: receiving department store catalogues and circulars in English and being served by sales people who did not speak French were accepted facts of life until the Quiet Revolution. Language legislation protecting French was first introduced in the 1960s, with numerous advances and retreats until the sovereigntist Parti Québécois government in 1977 passed the Charter of the French Language, also known as Bill 101. This law was the first to effectively give French the status of common language. It made French the

only permissible language on signs and required all children to enroll in French language schools unless their parents had attended English schools in Quebec. Since then it has been modified to be less exclusionary: English on signs is now allowed, provided it is less prominent than French, and Canadian citizens who have attended English schools anywhere in Canada may now send their children to a Quebec English school.

A major effect of Bill 101 was to reverse the direction of one-way bilingualism. Previously, the vast majority of bilingual Quebecers were francophone; by the early 1990s anglophones had a significantly larger proportion of bilinguals than did francophones. It could also be argued that the language legislation, ironically, has contributed to waning support for sovereignty, since it has reduced francophones' linguistic insecurity. English has certainly not disappeared from the workplace, especially in areas like technology and science, but French is now entrenched as the dominant language of work. I don't wish to paint too rosy a picture: because of the preponderance of English outside Quebec, there is still much pressure for francophones to learn Canada's other official language, but nobody talks any longer about the possible disappearance of French, a constant theme in the media and academia even up to the 1980s. The government initiatives to protect French have largely succeeded, but making it the language of work has brought about in some ways even more uncertainty, as Quebecers debate which *kind* of French should be the official one. Not surprisingly, prescriptivism is much in evidence during such debates.

2. THE CONTINUING "LANGUAGE QUESTION." Partly because of isolation from France but especially owing to the social and educational gulf between the Quebec intelligentsia and the working-class, there evolved an equally wide divergence between the written, largely Parisian standard and colloquial registers. One indicator of this gulf is that Quebec films shown in France have often been subtitled, a fact that for purists confirms the corrupt nature of everyday Quebec speech but from a more objective standpoint signals a mutual incomprehensibility due to often separate paths of innovation. Such distinctness is to be expected, since working-class European French and Quebec speech communities had for a long time very limited contact. More importantly, the social conditions affecting QF, notably pressure from English and insufficient backing from the federal and provincial governments, meant that popular Québécois essentially followed its own course. Since the nineteenth century, purists had dismissed *joual* as a cancerous, defective form of communication, but by the 1960s *joual* became for a good number of Quebec writers a source of pride, a crucial part of Quebecers' identity. By the 1970s a war raged between *joual*'s defenders and critics, especially over the extent to which standard QF should recognize and even adopt aspects of *joual*<sup>2</sup>. To give some indication of how this *querelle du joual* has been resolved, I will now examine Maurais 1999, a report on "language quality" prepared for the Council of the French Language.

<sup>2</sup> The publication in 1993 of the dictionary *Le Robert québécois d'aujourd'hui* triggered a furor not only because it recorded *joual* expressions but also because it actually included the word *joual*. This constituted, in the eyes of purists, a shameful acknowledgment of Quebec's everyday linguistic reality by France, the very country which was supposed to uphold language quality.

In Quebec, “*la qualité de la langue*” has become a ubiquitous expression, surfacing virtually everywhere non-linguists gather to discuss QF; its constant presence is arguably a sign that prescriptivism and often purism still very much inform Quebecers’ conception of their language, in spite of ever increasing attention paid to linguists in the educational system and language planning bodies.

The heart of Maurais’s report is a series of recommendations to public and private institutions for improving the quality of French. These institutions include schools, universities, government agencies, the Quebec Office of the French Language, the media, and the IT sector. My review will focus on Maurais’s definition of language quality and how it pertains to his eleven recommendations.

It is hard to imagine an expression that raises linguists’ eyebrows more quickly than “language quality.” Our immediate reaction is to pin a purist label on whoever uses this phrase. After all, “quality” implies value judgments which label certain usages as inherently superior to others. Even a quick perusal of Maurais’s report will nevertheless bring us to reconsider. He begins with an admission that “language quality” is not an easy thing to define. He is disappointed that linguists have little or nothing to say about language quality because their position leaves the concept in the hands of non-specialists. He attempts to base a definition on the proposal of Chantefort 1980, a generative treatment that argues for a distinction between “internal” and “external” quality. The former concerns grammaticality and acceptability, the latter, stylistic and sociological factors such as avoidance of anglicisms. Maurais rejects Chantefort’s definition of internal quality with the familiar argument that it is based on the overly idealized notion of speaker/hearer competence. As well, Chantefort’s external quality has too limited a role: it is based largely on puristic issues. For Garvin 1959, though, what determines a standard language is not just purism (in Garvin’s terms, “separation”) but several other functions like intellectualisation and social unification (Maurais 1999:41).

For Maurais, any language-internal quality must include not only the stable core but also variation, i.e., there would be specification of what preferred variants make up the standard, in explicit contradistinction to stigmatized variants like regionalisms and certain neologisms. The relevant factors external to the code would be esthetic and sociological in the largest sense, involving traditional stylistic considerations like clarity and logic, but also respect for taboos, ranging from political correctness to religious and sexual decorum. Such a definition must have built-in flexibility: the external factors are much more susceptible to change and individual choice. A case in point is literary discourse, which may well violate the rulings on “quality” syntax and lexicon, as seen with the winners of literary prizes such as the Prix Jules-Fournier. Moreover, the social context may have a huge impact on linguistic choices: in a tavern, rigidly adhering to the standard would likely trigger mockery from one’s fellow drinkers, while at the other extreme, as in a government dispatch, any deviation from the standard would be condemned. Finally, Maurais insists that the role of the schools is not to stamp out deviations from the norm, but to widen students’ repertoire, i.e., make them aware of standard options they may not have learned at home, and to leave the choice of standard or non-standard variants up to the individual. For linguists, such

remarks hardly seem controversial: I bring them up to show how far language planning has evolved in Quebec since the puristic treatments which prevailed until the 60s.

Having provided this multi-faceted definition of language quality, Maurais proposes eleven principles which he believes should inform policies aimed at its improvement:

1. The quality of a language is not independent of its status.
2. We must distinguish institutional from private use of language.
3. Bi- or multi-lingualism and comparison of two languages help to improve knowledge of one's native language.
4. In our culture, we tend to judge spoken language according to the rules of written language.
5. Linguistic "folklorisation" can be resisted via a modern and dynamic model of language.
6. We can avoid purism's excesses if we take linguistic variation into account.
7. Language quality is more than a crusade against anglicisms.
8. Language planning, including matters concerning language quality, should not depend on individual initiatives alone.
9. The standard language should be distinguished from literary language.
10. A native language cannot be taught in the same way as a second language.
11. Deficiencies in written language are more than just orthographic.

As with his definition of language quality, most of these principles are hardly the stuff of polemics. The last two seem today self-evident, but we need to place them in a specifically Quebec educational context. Underlying #10 is the fact that until the 70s, most French teachers considered all linguistic errors to be homogeneous manifestations of "bad French," regardless of the student's background<sup>3</sup>. More insightful are principles 1, 2, and 8. These reflect the 1977 upgrade in the status of French, with profound repercussions for both individuals and institutions. For Maurais, only when an authority bestows upon a language such recognition can it become more than a mundane instrument of communication, and the extension of its domains of usage requires efforts at the institutional level rather than just by individuals, as seen notably in the flourishing of terminology studies since the 1970s in both government and academic circles.

Likewise unremarkable from socio- and applied-linguistics standpoints are Principles 3, 6, and 7. Contrastive linguistics has long advocated inter-language comparison in L2 teaching, but the advantages of such comparison for increasing metalinguistic awareness of L1 are likewise undeniable. Secondly, linguists' classical response to purism has been variation, and, finally, Quebec linguists have long opposed the cultural elite's tendency to blame English for all deviations from the standard.

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<sup>3</sup> In English Canada too, this confusion of native and non-native learners occurs. For instance, in a fourth year French stylistics class for anglophones at my university, one text, from Quebec, focused on anglicisms to avoid: these were anglicisms which only Quebec francophones would produce, i.e., it would never occur to an advanced anglophone student unfamiliar with colloquial Quebec usage to use them spontaneously.

Of Maurais’s eleven principles, just two reflect traditional puristic disparagement of everyday spoken QF. Principle 4 defends judging and, implicitly, refashioning the colloquial according to the written. Citing Bourdieu and Boltanski 1975 and Vygotsky 1985, Maurais emphasizes that literacy profoundly affects one’s oral usage, both socially and cognitively. Consequently, language quality naturally incorporates a bias towards the written. Again, this idea is hardly contentious, but in a context where the establishment routinely shows contempt for its own colloquial usage, the link with purism is all too evident. Principle 5 is even more egregious, as it assumes that “folkloric” QF, i.e., *joual*, must be resisted via imposition of “modern and dynamic models”, i.e., presumably the norms of international French. This flies in the face of Maurais’s insistence that a school’s role is not to stamp out colloquial variants, but to widen students’ repertoire, giving them the option of adopting or not standard forms.

Overall, Maurais is representative of the evolution in Quebec from a black-and-white purism to a nuanced, well-informed grappling with the question of standardization. His leitmotif of “quality” reflects the ongoing prescriptivism noticeable at all levels of Quebec society. To reiterate a point from the introduction, though, to recommend some forms over others is a habit observable in all language communities.

Maurais’s report was published almost a decade ago, but its ambivalence towards spoken QF is still very much with us. Writing in Quebec’s most prestigious newspaper, *Le Devoir*, on March 15, 2008, Gil Courtemanche attacked the Executive Council of the nationalist Parti Québécois for proposing that schools teach “written and spoken standard québécois,” rather than French. Courtemanche’s arguments are familiar ones (e.g., the proposal stems from obsessive identity politics and would lead to even more isolation of Quebec, a language is more than a fragmentary collection of particularisms, Belgians and Swiss living in francophone areas still consider themselves French speakers in spite of regionalisms, etc.) What is more interesting about Courtemanche’s arguments is that he simultaneously insists on the realities of spoken Quebec usage, for instance, *chat* and *walkman* have much higher frequency than the official *clavardage* and *baladeur*, while at the same time he denigrates colloquial morpho-syntax and lexicon. In his words, by enshrining spoken québécois as an oral standard, the PQ would impose upon Quebecers ignorance and linguistic complacency, mediocrity, and the uselessness of syntax: these are epithets that purists have been hurling for decades at colloquial QF, as seen in classic treatments of the language question such as Desbiens 1960.<sup>4</sup>

3. AN OUTSIDER’S TAKE ON QF PRESCRIPTIVISM. Quebec prescriptivism is generally typical of language planning around the world, reflecting the ubiquitous ongoing tension between colloquial and elite usages. Nevertheless, the linguistic insecurity engendered by over two centuries of influence from English, added to the pan-francophone obsession with linguistic correctness, has brought prescriptivism here much more onto centre stage than in most other language communities. In any case, it is impossible to imagine any current broad

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<sup>4</sup> For further proof that the “question de la langue” is still a burning one, go to <http://www.vigile.net/+Qualite-de-la-langue+>

account of QF (whether descriptive or theoretical) that does not in some respects acknowledge prescriptivism. This has long been a practice in the best French dictionaries like the *Robert* and *Larousse*, where entries at the literary and colloquial extremes are included but flagged as socially marked. As Maurais insisted, allowing French to become the province's common, working language has inevitably meant an increased preoccupation with social and regional variation. Establishing a Quebec standard, still a work in progress, is a necessarily prescriptive task but one which has become far more nuanced and dispassionate than the puristic treatments which prevailed until the adoption of the Charter.



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