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THE UTILIZATION OF FRENCH-LANGUAGE GOVERNMENT SERVICES

A study on the factors associated with
the utilization of government services in
French by Nova Scotian Acadians and
Francophones.

Summary

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Acknowledgements and comments from the Office of Acadian Affairs

In July 2007, the Office of Acadian Affairs launched an invitation for tenders for the services of a researcher to conduct a psycho-linguistic province-wide study to identify the reasons why Nova Scotian Acadians so rarely avail themselves of government services offered to them in French.

The contract for the study was awarded to Kenneth Deveau of Université Sainte-Anne, who carried out the research with colleagues Rodrigue Landry and Réal Allard of the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities. The methodology, questionnaire, data collection and results analysis were designed by this team; the recommendations and conclusions contained herein reflect their opinions.

The study would not have been possible without funding under the Canada-Nova Scotia Agreement on French-Language Services. We wish to thank Canadian Heritage for its support, and also Kenneth Deveau and his colleagues for their excellent work.

Office of Acadian Affairs

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In the wake of the *2004 Congrès mondial acadien*, the Province of Nova Scotia passed a bill guaranteeing services in French to Acadians and Francophones, and declaring its commitment to the preservation and expansion of its Acadian and Francophone community. The *French-language Services Act* officially recognizes, among others, the Office of Acadian Affairs (OAA) by including it in the province's *Public Service Act* and by specifically stating its mandate which is to support the departments, organizations and Crown corporations in the creation or adaptation, where applicable, of policies, programs and services in French that reflect the needs of the Acadian and Francophone community of Nova Scotia. In accordance with this mandate, the OAA commissioned a study on the ethnolinguistic experiences, beliefs and attitudes of Nova Scotian Acadians and Francophones to better understand the factors associated with the utilization of services in French. Here below is a summary of the study.

In 2008, a survey was conducted among 600 Nova Scotians residing in the regions of Argyle, Clare, Chéticamp, Halifax and Isle-Madame. More than 70% of the Province's Francophone population lives in these five regions. Two data-collecting strategies were applied. In the regions where the Francophone population is denser (Argyle, Chéticamp, Clare and Isle-Madame), a telephone survey was carried out based on a list of randomly selected household telephone numbers. A written version of the questionnaire was sent to parents of students in the *Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP)* schools in the Halifax area where it is not as practically possible to reach Francophones by telephone. We wanted to ensure a balanced representation of Acadians and Francophones from each region. A strong majority of respondents are originally Nova Scotian (78.1%) and have French as their first language (85.4%). The majority of these people are aged from 35 to 54 years (58.7%). Of note is the fact that most of the respondents are women (62.6%).

Inspired by the self-determined ethnolinguistic behaviour model (Landry, Allard, Deveau and Bourgeois, 2005), the survey questionnaire included approximately one hundred questions on various aspects of language experiences, psycholinguistic development and language behaviour. The survey results evaluate the effects of two levels of factors on the utilization of services in French, namely the structures connected to the proactivity in the offering of service in French as well as sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic personal variables.

Ethnolinguistic socialization experiences

With the exception of interpersonal contacts within the family and the community, the respondents have, throughout their lives, generally had little contact with the French language. French has held a relatively modest place in terms of the respondents' schooling, especially at the secondary and postsecondary levels. More than one third of the respondents stated that the majority of their high-school courses were in English, while one quarter claimed that they completed a more or less equal number of courses in each of the two languages. Among those who pursued postsecondary studies (62.9%), more than half studied in English. The majority of the respondents stated they were rarely in contact with French-language media and cultural products. Relatively few of the respondents have had experiences of ethnolinguistic conscientization. Only one half among them stated they had discussed issues related to the importance of speaking French. Four respondents out of ten felt they had been well informed of the importance of being taught in French in a French-language school. Three respondents out of ten shared that they often had the opportunity to learn about French language rights or about the injustices that Acadians and Francophones historically endured.

Psycholinguistic development

According to our theoretical model, the ethnolinguistic experience is linked to how a person develops on the psycholinguistic level in terms of his/her beliefs, attitudes, desires, skills and behaviour. With respect to their perception of their community's vitality, Nova Scotia's Acadians and Francophones appear to be relatively optimistic. Half the respondents think that French and English are both equally important and prestigious in their region. Moreover, one out of two respondents believes that French and English are equally present in their region's linguistic landscape (signage, billboards, advertisements). The majority (67.4%) of those surveyed also thinks that the French-language situation in their region will remain the same or will improve over the next twenty years. None the less, an objective evaluation of this situation and of the current tendencies would probably not arrive at such optimistic conclusions with regard to the vitality of the French language in these regions. Preferences for French and English depend upon the areas in which the languages were used. Three-quarters of those surveyed prefer that their children be taught in French — these results represent an important evolution when

compared to those of our studies on this issue some ten years ago (Deveau, 2001). A relatively strong majority of respondents nevertheless prefer to use English in public, institutional and cultural environments. Respondents did however manifest a very strong Acadian identity and a majority of these consider themselves more prominently Francophone than Anglophone. Only two respondents out of ten opt for a bilingual self-definition whereby they would be as much Anglophone as Francophone. The majority of respondents take the position that being Francophone is an important part of their identity, and they are proud to be Francophone. These two aspects of their identity engagement (self-categorization and collective self-esteem) do not seem, however, to translate into everyone being committed to the Acadian and Francophone community. In terms of their language skills, the respondents tend to consider themselves as good in French as in English orally, but clearly superior in English reading and writing.

Language-related behaviour

We assessed 21 respondent language-related behaviours in three different areas of life. The degree to which these behaviours are in French or in English can be influenced by environmental and situational constraints; they can also reflect the cultural and language-related experience and its internalization in one's psycholinguistic development. On the whole, the respondents tend to use French in private contexts and English in public ones. We observe, however, that the usage of French decreases according to the age of the interlocutor: 80% of the respondents speak French with their parents, 74% speak French with their brothers and sisters, and 67% with their children.

The utilization of services in French

Respondents were asked to estimate how likely they were to use French in 17 different situations when requesting provincial government services. The majority generally stated it would be highly likely for them to use French when requesting these services, but the data reveals that the likelihood of using French depends on the presence or absence of certain conditions. More respondents are prepared to utilize services in spoken rather than in written French. Regardless of the situation, however, the offer of service in French must be an active one. In other words, a majority of the respondents are not prepared to request service in French unless the offer is made

to them directly. We found in particular that just over one respondent out of 10 (13.6%) claims that it is highly likely he/she will request service in French without being invited to, or in other words, without being prompted. However, more than half of the respondents stated that the likelihood of requesting services in the French language is very high when the service provider wears a pin indicating he/she is bilingual, if there is signage advertising that services are available in French, or when bilingual displays are present on the site or location. Furthermore, if the service provider starts the conversation in French, by saying “Hello, bonjour!” for example, nearly seven out of ten respondents (68.5%) claim that they will most likely continue speaking in French, and when the provider “speaks French with ease”, nine out of ten (86.9%) respondents replied they would most likely continue the conversation in French.

Our analyses confirm that attitudes toward the French language as well as toward a strong and committed Francophone identity are important factors in utilizing French-language government services. These identifying variables are in fact better predictors on the utilization of services in French than are language skills. The results of our analyses show that the Frenchness of the ethnolinguistic experience, the level of education and the frequency of experiences of a consciousness-raising nature indirectly contribute to an increase in the probability of utilizing government services in French, through their contribution to one’s psycholinguistic development.

In conclusion, Nova Scotia’s Acadian and Francophone community members have proven to be remarkably persevering in resisting the assimilating forces they have been subjected to. This community has also sought to enrich itself by integrating Francophones from elsewhere in Canada and from various Francophone countries. The community can also congratulate itself on recent progress made both politically and institutionally. In spite of this, the linguistic assimilation rate for Francophones of this province is at such a level that the community will not be able to maintain itself indefinitely. We wish to emphasize that this opportunity for the Province to promote the development of its Francophone minority is being offered at a most opportune time, since the community cannot afford many more delays. Following our review of the results in light of our theoretical framework, we submit the following six priority recommendations:

1. Ensure that government services are offered in French, orally and in writing.
2. Bilingualize road signs, as well as provincial posters and signage, making the French versions more prominent in the Acadian regions.
3. Propose that forms and information be written in a bilingual format, rather than in two separate versions in English and in French.
4. Ensure the active offer of government services in French by advertising that the service exists, and by asking those service providers competent in French and English to wear special pins indicating that service can be provided in French and in English, and requiring that these same service providers proactively greet clients in French as well as in English.
5. Implement a recruitment and training strategy for civil servants who are bilingual and conscientized to the issues pertaining to the utilization of governmental services in French.
6. Develop a provincial campaign to promote the French language and Acadian and Francophone culture.

We want to stress that the sooner these recommendations are acted upon, the more positive and significant their results will be.