LINGUISTIC INDICATORS: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN PROVIDING INSIGHTS INTO THE FRANCOPHONE REALITY IN CANADA AND QUEBEC[1]

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The release of the results from the latest census concerning linguistic diversity and use of French during the summer of 2022 generated many reactions, especially from the media.[2] It has proven difficult to reach a consensus on the best indicators to use to properly identify the place and evolution of the French language in Quebec and Canada. Given that the international francophone space has been our field of research for more than twenty years, it is interesting to see what we can learn from the realities of francophone countries outside of our borders. It is imperative that we acknowledge that the renewal of French-speaking populations in North America will depend on international immigration, particularly from these new pools of the French-speaking population.[3]

Let's start by recalling a few names. Former Presidents Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, Hamani Diori of Niger and Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia are known as the fathers of La Francophonie. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Abdou Diouf, Michaëlle Jean and Louise Mushikiwabo have all held the presidency of the International Organization of the Francophonie. Yasmina Khadra, Alain Mabankou, Ahmadou Kourouna and the Goncourt Prize winners Mohamed Sarr, Amin Malouf, Tahar Ben Jelloun are among the most distinguished authors of the French language, to whom we can add Dany Laferrière, Jim Corcoran, Kim Thuy and Boucar Diouf. What do these people have in common? They are certainly great personalities of the French-speaking world, but none of their mother tongues are French.

They are the reflection of the francophone world, which has been completely transformed over the last few decades. At the beginning of the 1960s, the francophone population was well established in the Global North – more than 90% – and it was essentially composed of people whose mother tongue was French. This is no longer the case in 2022: nearly 60% of the

1 This article builds on and expands on a reflection that we started in an opinion piece published in *Le Soleil* et *Le Devoir* in June 2002 under the title *"Dans une galaxie francophone près de chez vous."*

2 My colleague Jean-Pierre Corbeil, associate professor at Université Laval, and I gave more than twenty interviews between mid-August and mid-September: https://www.odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/actualites/nombreuses-interventions-dans-les-medias-de-richard-marcoux-et-jean-pierre-corbeil.

3 For more information, refer to these two studies: Marcoux, Richard and Laurent RICHARD (2017). *"De nouveaux pays sources d'immigration d'expression française pour le Canada: synthèse et enjeux"* / "New Countries as Sources of French-speaking Immigrants in Canada: Synthesis and Stakes." Quebec, *Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone*, Université Laval, 22 p. Marcoux, Richard and Laurent RICHARD (2017). *"Tendances démographiques dans l'espace francophone."* Quebec, Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone / Université Laval, 31 p.

321 million Francophones are in the Global South where very few have French as their mother tongue.

As I have pointed out on several occasions: **we are fewer and fewer born French-speaking, but we are increasingly becoming so.**

These 321 million people live in what we call the "galaxie francophone", within which we have defined a subset of territories, the "planète naître ou vivre en français", which includes those who are exposed to the French language in their everyday lives. The number of French speakers on this "planet" has grown by 55 million from 2010 to 2022, of which 50 million (91%) are on the African continent, which confirms the shift of the center of the Francophone world from Europe to Africa and more particularly to the Sub-Saharan part of this continent.

However, multilingualism is what predominantly characterizes the linguistic systems of Francophone Africa. A recently published study of ours shows that between 75% and 98% of the populations of the nearly thirty studied cities in French-speaking Africa (Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa) declared that they master two or more languages. Situations varied, but French was omnipresent.[4]

The table attached is taken from this research and summarizes information for five large urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa, encompassing a total of more than 25 million people in 2022.[5] As we can see, between 69% and 98% of the inhabitants are multilingual Francophones, since they have declared that they are fluent in French as well as another language; most of the time, it is a national language widespread in one of these countries. French is also used at home and at work, to varying degrees, subject to the context, of course, but for more than 9 out of 10 people in Abidjan, Douala, and Libreville, and for 1 out of 2 in the huge capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa, which has more than 12 million inhabitants.

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Abidjan presents a compelling example since nearly 96% of its population declared that they predominantly speak French at work. According to the latest census from December 2021, 20% of the more than 5.6 million people who live in this city speak only French at home, while 70% of the inhabitants of Abidjan declared that they use French and an Ivorian language at home. This multilingual Francophone pattern is also characteristic, with some variations, of the major cities of other countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, etc. Elsewhere, French is less present, but is a partner language, along with Wolof in Senegal, Bambara (Bamanankan) in Mali, Arabic, and Tamazight in the Maghreb, and this, while very often being the main or only language of the education systems, from primary school to university. It is important to note that school has become the main site for the

THE PROPORTION OF THE FRENCH-SPEAKING POPULATION AGED 15 AND OVER WHO ARE MULTILINGUAL, WHO USE FRENCH AT HOME, AND WHO SPEAK IT AT WORK IN FIVE LARGE URBAN AREAS ACROSS FRENCH-SPEAKING AFRICA IN 2015.

	Multilingual French speakers	Use French at home	Use French at work
Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire)	92.4%	92.2%	95.7%
Douala (Cameroon)	98.1%	92.4%	97.8%
Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo)	87.3%	57.6%	51.2%
Libreville (Gabon)	87.1%	91.1%	98.7%
Pikine/Dakar (Senegal)	69.1%	17.9%	37.6%

Source: TNS-Kantar, Data survey from Africascope program of 2015 (processed by the author).

4 Bougma, Moussa et Richard Marcoux (2022). *Portrait démolinguistique de quelques grandes villes d'Afrique subsaharienne et du Maghreb: un plurilinguisme dominant*. Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone, Université Laval, research report from ODSEF, 55 p

5 According to the site Atlas des populations et pays du monde (Populationdata.net) consulted on September 19, 2022

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It is worth recalling that more and more French-speaking immigrants are coming to Quebec and Canada from this continent. As for multilingualism, the data from the last Canadian census revealed that multilingualism was on the rise: "taking all languages together, in 2021, 58.8% of Canadians are unilingual, 32.1% were bilingual, 7.6% were trilingual and 1.5% could have a conversation in four or more languages" (*Le Quotidien*, August 17, 2022, page 15).

multilingualism among Francophones is not fiction, as some demographers and other experts would want us to believe. It is clear that the mother tongue is an indicator that must continue to be collected in surveys and censuses, but this information is clearly insufficient for defining who is a francophone.

Finally, it is repeatedly being said that Quebec is surrounded by more than 300 million anglophones in America. So why not attempt to bring Quebec and Canada closer to the millions of French-speaking people around the world who may be physically/geographically far away, but only a click or a Zoom away? Why not promote exchanges with these other Francophones across the planet/globe? Is it possible, above all, to stop creating obstacles for those who wish to study here, discover Quebec and Canada, and, why not, live here and start a family? It is surely time to revive the idea of a francophone visa that would facilitate mobility across this galaxy.

Pierre Bourgault wrote in 1997, "Today, our children of all origins recognize themselves with our common language and are aware that French, while it isolates us in North America, also opens up all horizons around the world." These horizons are now composed of more than 320 million Francophones on various continents.