LANGUAGE MIXING CAUSES A STIR: CONFRONTING SCIENCE AND PUBLIC OPINION

SHANA POPLACK, NATHALIE DION, SUZANNE ROBILLARD AND BASILE ROUSSEL

Shana Poplack is Distinguished University Professor and Canada Research Chair in Linguistics at the University of Ottawa, and founding director of the Sociolinguistics Laboratory there. Her work applies theoretical and methodological insights gained from the scientific study of everyday speech to a variety of languages and phenomena involved in language contact, language change and linguistic ideology.

Nathalie Dion is Research Coordinator of the University of Ottawa Sociolinguistics Lab and collaborator on a number of projects investigating various aspects of linguistic variation and change, especially in bilingual and minority language contexts.

Suzanne Robillard is a PhD candidate and researcher at the Sociolinguistics Lab at the University of Ottawa. She specializes in the study of language contact phenomena and minority French in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada. She regularly leads workshops addressing issues of linguistic insecurity and language confidence in minority francophone communities.

Basile Roussel is a PhD candidate in the uOttawa Linguistics Department and an active member of the Sociolinguistics Lab there. His research focuses on language variation and change in Acadian French, bilingualism and language contact, and language ideologies.

INTRODUCTION

The *Official Languages Act* of Canada granted equal status to French and English at the federal level. But the way these languages are distributed on the ground is anything but equal, be it in terms of numbers of speakers, situations felt to be appropriate for their use, or most of all, relative prestige. In the court of public opinion, the French spoken here is often judged inferior to some imagined standard variety, even by its own native speakers. It is also thought to be receding, to the point where many feel that it is endangered. For francophones, a major aggressor is English, and its poster child

is lexical borrowing, as in (1) and (2). This gives rise to the dreaded *anglicismes*, commonly held to lead to the deterioration, if not death, of the borrowing language. Minority anglophones fear the same fate from the *gallicisms* they feel are invading their English, as in (3). Rather than celebrate the cultural and cognitive advantages that bilingualism offers, many Canadians worry that contact between our official languages will impact the "quality" and even survival of both.

1. *On lavait les planchers à la main, tu sais, puis après ça on* polishait *avec notre fessier.* (OH.041.1598)[1] 'We'd wash the floors by hand, you know, and after that we'd polish with our butt.'

2. *À côté, il y a un autre gros* building highrise. (OH.029.153) 'Next door, there's another big high-rise building.'

3. And he washed windows and he drove *calèches* 'carriages'. (QEC.006.169)

As sociolinguists, our mandate is to study language the way it is actually used in social context, so our research is often inspired by society's take on linguistic matters. This is why a major focus at the uOttawa Sociolinguistics Laboratory (www.sociolinguistics.uottawa.ca/thelab.html) has been to test the effects of bilingualism on the languages in contact. We have amassed huge datasets of spontaneous speech and developed cutting-edge methods to study them scientifically. Over the years, our team has analyzed more than five million words of French spoken by 323 minority and majority francophones born between 1846–1994, 2.5 million words from Quebec anglophones who acquired English before and after the passage of Bill 101, and countless more from bilinguals in over a dozen other language pairs like Wolof/French, Tamil/English, and Arabic/French, among others. In total, we have investigated more than 40,000 instances of language mixing. These efforts did in fact yield answers to our questions, but they weren't the ones anyone was expecting.

For example, systematic inspection of our corpus of French spoken in the National Capital Region turned up over 20,000 English words, a seemingly massive number. But when we contextualized them with respect to the words that had *not* been borrowed, we found that they were incredibly rare (representing no more than .008% of the total discourse)! What's more, historical analysis showed that most spur-of-the-moment borrowings are *ephemeral*, disappearing after their first mention. As such, they simply don't persist long enough to alter the structure of French. On the contrary, they *adopt* that structure, giving rise to locutions like *polishait* (appropriately conjugated in the French 3rd p. imperfect indicative) in (1) or *un gros building high-rise* (following French adjective placement rules) in (2). We replicated these analyses on other language pairs, like Ukrainian/English in (4), and found the same result.

4. *Vzhe v serednij* shkol-*i ja xodyla v misti.* [UKR.09.A.347] 'I was already in the city for high school.'

This research, detailed in many publications and a

1 Codes in parentheses refer to corpus, speaker and line number of the utterance. Examples are reproduced verbatim from audio recordings.

volume entitled *Borrowing: Loanwords in the Speech Community and in the Grammar* (Oxford University Press 2018), is what led to the discovery that there is nothing random, need-based, or even particularly Canadian about language "mixing"; it stems from rule-governed communicative discourse processes, it is favoured by the most proficient bilinguals in the community, and its conventions appear to be universal.

SPREADING THE WORD

The University of Ottawa Media Relations Office issued a press release, in both French and English, in the form of a text, an infographic and a YouTube video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtcyPTH-pSm0). These summarized the research results that they considered most newsworthy: borrowed words are rare, transient, and integrated into the grammar of the borrowing language. Accordingly, contact with a "donor" language (in this case, English) does not affect the structure of the recipient (here, French). Language mixing does not arise from laziness or limited proficiency; on the contrary, it is highly structured, requires a certain degree of bilingual proficiency, and is the *norm* in bilingual communities worldwide. It goes without saying that these findings run counter to received wisdom, which advocates the opposing position on each of the above – in the notable absence of any empirical proof. The press release therefore made a point of emphasizing the scientific, empirical, and quantitative nature of our research.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The reaction of the media was immediate and substantial, leading to dozens of radio interviews and print articles in major venues (including CBC News, BBC World, RCI español, the front page of the *Globe & Mail*). Beyond the frequent introduction of the provocative – and polarizing – term *franglais* in many headlines, the core conclusions of the research were accurately reported, and their scientific basis was clearly conveyed.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

Public response was even more profuse: the YouTube video has been viewed over 3000 times, and the official share count for the CBC News piece alone is even higher. Half of the articles were republished (an average of six times each) by other outlets. This amount of stakeholder interest is unusual for academic sociolinguistic research, and confirms the intense interest that bilingualism and its effects still hold for Canadians.

To get a sense of *who* actually saw these articles and what they were saying about them, we searched Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Google. Access to complementary social networks enabled us to retrieve nearly 900 shares, and analyze about one-third, which themselves generated more than 800 comments and over 3000 reactions.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

Content analysis revealed that stakeholder reactions were very strong. Remarkably, public affect towards the message is divided right down the middle: 52% positive ("*Oh, sweet validation!*"), 48% negative ("*Je call bullshit.*"). The media presented scientific evidence that should have alleviated fears of bilingualism. For some it did. Why then did others remain recalcitrant? A few took issue with

the study itself: in their view, either the sample was flawed or the scope too limited. Some rejected the scientific basis of the work (" *'hard science'? You loons are hilarious, at times.*"), while others suspected some kind of bias, political or otherwise ("*Une étude commandée par les fédés, j'imagine*"). One poster went so far as to claim that the work is a ploy to eliminate French. In any case, most of the opinions expressed appeared unrelated to the actual research. Some argued that "outsiders" shouldn't be studying the situation because they just don't get it ("*Anglophone gonna anglosplaining*"). Many rejected the findings because they didn't correspond to their own stance ("*Oui ça nuit au français malgré tous vos diplômes qui essaient de dire le contraire*"), while others countered with anecdotes ("*My little girl is only 10. […] she says… 'Mommy, that's not real words, that's mixed up words.*"). By the same token, an entire cohort embraced the research simply because that's what they thought all along ("*Je pense que je suis d'accord avec cette affirmation, sans avoir lu le texte*"), or it jibed with their personal feelings towards mixing (*Franglais* is "*useful*," "*creative*," "*enriching*," "*normal*," "*inevitable*"). The debate wasn't so much about the science; it was about the message.

LINGUISTIC DIVIDE

Who is adopting these diametrically opposed positions? When we examine the relationship between stance and language of reaction, we learn that responses written in English are twice as likely to be positive (76%) as those written in French (35%). Nearly two thirds of the latter reject the results, insisting instead that words borrowed *from English* (importantly, *not* from Italian or First Nations languages or Spanish, but specifically from English) are harmful to the quality and survival of French in Canada. Many who posted in English think lexical borrowing is enriching, or fun ("*I see 'franglais' as a pathway to a richer bilingualism in this country, and a more enjoyable one*"), or just don't care ("*Are they seriously throwing money at this ridiculous non-issue?*"). Of course, these results closely mirror the sociopolitical divide between francophones and anglophones that characterizes Canada today. Perhaps most unfortunate, the empowering message suggested by the research and explicitly conveyed by the media—that language mixing is a natural outcome of language contact that does not affect the grammatical structure of the recipient, let alone lead to its demise—is emphatically rejected by a majority of francophone commentators ("*Cette chercheuse est en train de nous dire que le ciel, c'est vert et le gazon, c'est bleu…*"), and the evidence that underpins that message is discounted.

DISCUSSION

Why did this particular research cause such a stir? We think it's because its results are so completely at odds with the expectation that borrowed words wreak havoc on the borrowing language. It is unclear where this particular conviction came from or how such enormous consensus on it developed. Nonetheless, in Canada at least, language mixing – the universal linguistic product of bilingualism – has become emblematic of a stance that extends well beyond the purview of linguistics. A rough characterization of that stance is that incorporation of words from a numerically or politically dominant language into another is the thin edge of the wedge leading to adoption of that language, then of its culture, and eventually to loss of the first language and culture, followed by assimilation of its speakers to the dominant counterparts. Sadly, history is

replete with cases of individuals or groups of differing ethnic, religious, or linguistic heritage that have suffered just such a fate. Fears in that regard are therefore not without merit. The question is what the contribution of *bilingualism and language mixing* is to such an outcome. Is there any correlation between borrowing words and the eventual assimilation or demise of the bilinguals who engage in this process? The results of technical linguistic research demonstrate that they are independent.

These facts go a long way towards explaining not only the great interest with which the story was greeted, but also the resistance of many to the results. That bilingualism is a major societal concern in Canada was actually the original impetus for undertaking this empirical work in the first place, and the motivation for investing such prodigious resources in it. As linguists, we wanted to ensure that we could speak to the issues from the vantage point of science. Still, the message remains one that many Canadians cannot accept. We know that this has more to do with the sociopolitical situation than with our particular sociolinguistic research, but it is worth considering how the latter can be brought to bear on the situation. This may not alleviate fears or change opinions, but it could help channel our energies to more practical avenues, such as increasing efforts to make choosing either – or both! – of our official languages appropriate and apolitical in many more contexts, and minimizing normative sanctions that result in linguistic insecurity, rather than investing so heavily in the futile task of trying to eliminate words of one language from the discourse of another.