THE EVOLUTION OF FRENCH-ENGLISH BILINGUALISM IN CANADA OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS: A REFLECTION OF THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN FRENCH AND ENGLISH-SPEAKING CANADIANS?

JEAN-PIERRE CORBEIL

Jean-Pierre Corbeil is Deputy Director of the Diversity and Socio-Cultural Statistics Division and Chief Specialist at the Centre for Ethnocultural, Language and Immigration Statistics at Statistics Canada.

During the work of the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission, one of the major outcomes of which was the adoption in 1969 of the first *Official Languages Act*, the Commissioners recognized that the affirmation of Canada's bilingual character did not necessarily require individual bilingualism among the population. On the other hand, French-English institutional bilingualism had to be one of the fundamental expressions of Canada's linguistic duality. The objective was to ensure that "the main institutions, both public and private, can provide their services in both languages to citizens who may well, in the vast majority, be unilingual".[1] But since the existence of this institutional bilingualism requires a sufficient number of bilingual people to "ensure relations between the two linguistic groups", the Commission was also mandated to "make recommendations on how to enable Canadians to become bilingual".

In 1968, in his statement in the House of Commons on the resolution preceding the introduction of the *Official Languages Act*, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau pointed out that "the most important example of[the] diversity of the country] is undoubtedly the existence of the two main linguistic groups, both of which are large enough and rich enough in material and intellectual resources to resist the forces of assimilation. In the past, he pointed out, our public institutions have not adequately reflected this reality, which is the foundation of our country". He went on to say that "We

1 Rapport de la Commission royale d'enquête sur le bilinguisme et le biculturalisme, Livre!: Les langues officielles, Ottawa, Imprimeur de la Reine et contrôleur de la papeterie, 229 p.

believe in two official languages and a pluralistic society, not only as a political necessity, but as an enrichment"[2].

Since the adoption of the first *Official Languages Act* in 1969, the number of people reporting that they can conduct a conversation in both official languages at the time of the census has increased from 2,900,000 in 1971 to 6,216,000 in 2016. The French-English bilingualism rate thus increased from 13.4% to 17.9% during this period. In addition, it should be noted that in 1971, 57% of the country's bilingual French-English population resided in Quebec. In 2016, this proportion was 62%.

However, this growth in French-English bilingualism has not been constant. As shown in Figure 1, French-English bilingualism grew very significantly between 1961 and 1981 in Canada, and particularly in Canada outside Quebec. In fact, the average annual growth rate of French-English bilingualism during this last period was more than twice that of the entire population. This strong growth reflected a growing interest among many Canadians in learning French as a second language, particularly because of the economic benefits that could be associated with it.

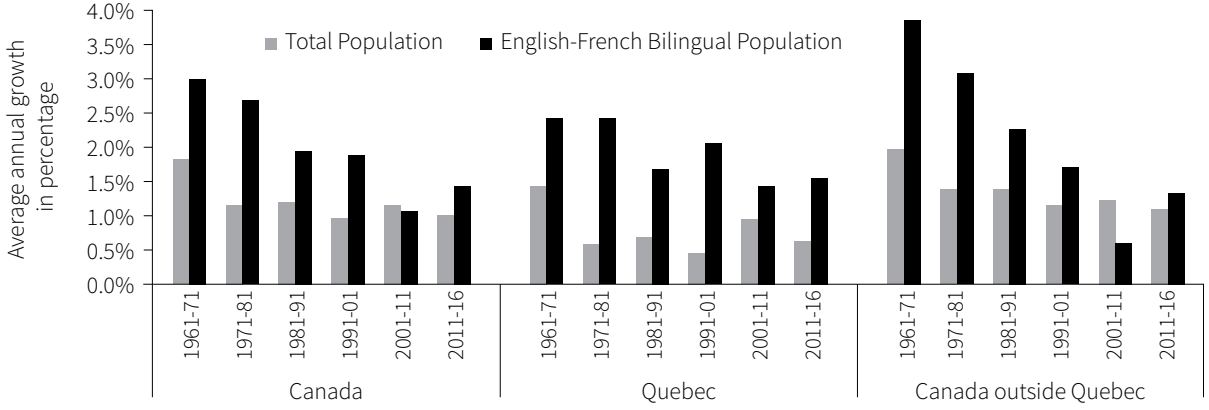
In Quebec, the gap between the average growth rate of the bilingual population and that of the province's total population has been systematically very large, with the exception of the period 2001 to 2011. In Canada outside Quebec, the average annual growth rate of the bilingual population has declined steadily since 1971, but appears to have rebounded significantly between 2011 and 2016.

Several factors explain this situation, including the fact that the growth of the total population, mainly driven by international immigration, has been much higher in Canada as a whole outside Quebec than in the latter province. However, immigration is certainly not the only factor that caused the proportion of the population able to conduct a conversation in both official languages to increase from 8.0% to 9.8% between 1971 and 2011 only in Canada outside Quebec, compared with 27.6% to 44.5% in Quebec. In fact, one of the main sources of explanation is the phenomenon of non-retention of second-language skills among young people whose English is the first official language spoken in Canada outside Quebec.

In addition to the regular mandatory French second language programs, which generally result in very little retention of second-language skills in the medium term, it is the enthusiasm for French immersion programs that has resulted in many young people being intensively exposed to learning French as a second language. While in the early 1970s, only a few thousand young people were enrolled in such programs, strong growth began in the early 1980s. At the beginning of the 1981-1982 school year, less than 50,000 young people in Canada outside Quebec were in French immersion. The latest available results (school year 2016-2017) revealed that nearly 450,000 young people were enrolled in such a program. After having been relatively stable between 1995 and 2005, the number of registrations has since increased by more than 35%.

2 Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *Déclaration du premier ministre à la Chambre des communes sur la résolution précédant la présentation du projet de Lois sur les langues officielles*, Ottawa: Cabinet du Premier ministre, 1989. 8 p. Bibliothèque et Archives Canada.

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH RATE OF TOTAL POPULATION AND ENGLISH-FRENCH BILINGUAL POPULATION BETWEEN 1961 AND 2016, CANADA, QUEBEC AND CANADA OUTSIDE QUEBEC



Despite this enthusiasm for French immersion programs in Canada outside Quebec, and despite the fact that those who have attended such a program are much more likely to maintain their French-English bilingualism in the medium term than young people who have attended a regular French-language program,[3] there is nevertheless an erosion of prior learning over time.

While the bilingualism rate among English-speaking youth outside Quebec generally reached its highest level when they were 15 to 19 years of age, at the time of high school graduation, since 2006, the highest rate has been observed among youth aged 10 to 14 years. In 2016, the French-English bilingualism rate among this age group was about 15% compared to nearly 13.5% among youth aged 15 to 19. Since more and more parents are enrolling their children in French immersion as early as kindergarten or first grade, it is likely that there will also be an increase in French-English bilingualism among 15- to 19-year-olds in the next census. There also appears to be a significant increase in the number of English-speaking parents who choose to send their child to a French-language school.[4]

However, according to the main scenarios in Statistics Canada's latest language projections[5], with the exception of Saskatchewan, all provinces west of Quebec are expected to experience a higher rate of growth in their non-bilingual (French-English) population than their bilingual population.

3 See Mary Allen, 2008. "Bilinguisme chez les jeunes au Canada", Questions d'éducation: le point sur l'éducation, l'apprentissage et la formation au Canada, vol. 5, no 4, décembre, no 81-004-X au catalogue de Statistique Canada.

4 See article in *Globe and Mail*, July 2019: www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-french-school-boards-face-potential-constitutional-challenge/

5 See René Houle et Jean-Pierre Corbeil (2017), *Projections linguistiques pour le Canada 2011-2036*, No 89-657-X2017001 au catalogue, Statistique Canada.

Meanwhile, across the country, Quebec should remain the main driver of growth in French-English bilingualism in the country, which, according to the same projections, would bring bilingualism to around 18.5% by 2036.

The results of these language projections also reveal that the issue of retention of French language skills among the population with English as their first official language spoken in Canada outside Quebec seems much more important than that of the increase in the lack of knowledge of French among immigrants. One would be led to believe that since the majority of immigrants arrive in the country in adulthood, an age when learning a second or even a third language is more difficult, a growth in the immigrant population could constitute a significant barrier to the evolution of French-English bilingualism among the English-speaking population. However, the results of the language projections reveal that even using a theoretical scenario whereby Canada would not receive any immigrants between 2017 and 2036, the French-English bilingualism rate would only increase by one percentage point compared to the result from the reference scenario, which is based on trends over the past 15 years. Moreover, there is no difference between the bilingualism rates of young English-speaking immigrants and those of Canadian-born youth.

It is therefore on the side of non-retention of achievements in the medium or long term that the evolution of French-English bilingualism in Canada, particularly in Canada outside Quebec, is at stake.

According to language projections for the period 2011 to 2036, if young people in Canada outside Quebec who have already acquired the ability to conduct a conversation in both official languages by the time they finish high school (around 17 years of age) were able to maintain their second language skills, the proportion of those who would still be bilingual by 2036 could increase to 11.5% compared to the 6.7% obtained under the reference scenario (i. e., based on trends observed between 2001 and 2011). Moreover, if the number of these bilingual young people aged 5 to 14 were to be doubled and they maintained their French language skills, this proportion could reach 13.6% by 2036.

What would be the impact of such progress on the rate of bilingualism across the country? By 18.5% (reference scenario), maintaining French language skills after the age of 17 among the English-speaking population outside Quebec could mean that 22.5% of the Canadian population could converse in both of Canada's official languages. And if we doubled the number of bilingual young people aged 5 to 14 years outside Quebec and if they could maintain their French language skills, this proportion could reach 24.4%, or nearly a quarter of the Canadian population.

These scenarios, while theoretical, result in results that challenge us on the factors that can contribute to maintaining or even improving knowledge of both official languages in Canada. Exposure to the learning of both official languages at an early age and its maintenance over time is undoubtedly an undeniable asset and a valuable asset in an individual's personal development. It also establishes bridges and dialogue between speakers of the country's official language communities.

Although the rate of French-English bilingualism

in the country has increased since the adoption of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969 and many Canadians have been exposed to learning both official languages, several challenges remain. The enrichment associated with both official languages, which Pierre-Elliot Trudeau spoke of in 1968, has already been demonstrated and experienced by many Canadians. However, the fact that Quebec is the driving force behind the growth of French-English bilingualism in the country, essentially reading that the French-speaking population is increasingly proficient in English, while the English-speaking population outside that province is seeing its level of knowledge of French stagnate, calls for reflection on promising mechanisms and initiatives that could enable Canadians to take advantage of and benefit from this opportunity for dialogue and openness to others.