INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-BENOÎT NADEAU AND JULIE BARLOW

Authors of *The Story of French*

ABSTRACT

Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow's new book, *The Story of French* (Knopf, 2006), is a study of the life of the French language, its development, spread, history, and future, and just how the French language has survived despite English's prevalence, as well as other languages.

1) What motivated you to write your book on the story of the French language?

Jean-Benoît Nadeau: Two things, really. The first has to do with how French entered our lives. In France, Julie passes for a Québécoise, but she actually grew up in Ontario speaking English. She couldn't even put a sentence together in French in 1987 when we met at McGill University, where we were both studying political science. When we started living together, we started a language exchange system that we stuck to for 10 years; basically, we switched the household language every week from English to French and back. I still had a lot to learn myself. Julie progressively became not only bilingual, but virtually bicultural – today she writes articles in French for *L'actualité* magazine.

As for me, well, I was quite an anglophile as a child and teenager, but French has always been a pet topic of mine – as a writer, it is a fascinating topic, historically, linguistically and politically, not just in terms of Canadian politics but also of geopolitics. Throughout my studies, and later as a bilingual writer, I always wondered how French and English ended up where they are.

Julie Barlow: The other reason was globalization. We went to France to the study the French for two years in 1999-2001, thanks to a fellowship from an American foundation. Jean-Benoît was the fellow in title and he was supposed to study "why the French resisted globalization". But we quickly saw that the French weren't resisting at all, so we decided to try to explain this misconception. At the same time, we saw that French, not just English, was a globalizing force of its own. When we wrote our book on the French, which became an international bestseller, we were already thinking of a book on the French language. There are academic books on the history or French, but no one had yet written a popular history of the French language.

2) Briefly expound on why French is still an influential language in the world despite decreasing numbers of speakers globally.

JBN: It's funny how the discourse on the decline of France – which is quite false – has spilled over to one on the decline of French – also false. In fact, the number of French speakers in the world is not decreasing, but increasing. In the last 50 years, it has tripled to a minimum of 175 million. I say a minimum because the number of French speakers is an elastic notion. For instance, another 100 million are regarded as fluent occasional speakers, and another 100 million are learning the language – French is the second most taught language in the world after English, way ahead of Spanish, Arabic, Russian and even Chinese. If you consider the distribution, the

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JULIE BARLOW is a magazine journalist and writer. Her work recently won four Honorary Mentions at Canada's National Magazine Awards and the Quebec Magazine Awards. She is co-author with Jean-Benoît Nadeau of *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong* and *The Story of French*.

picture is also surprising: English is an official language in 45 countries, French in 33, and then it falls to 21 and 20 for Spanish and Arabic.

JB: We spoke earlier of the geopolitics of language. What most books on language do, really, is either tell the linguistic history of the language or celebrate its inherent beauty. This is particularly true of books on English and French. Few take the bull by the horns and explain how and why this language developed and spread. Languages don't spread because they are beautiful: it's a matter of trade, science, industry, politics, diplomacy, war, colonialism. If a quarter to half of basic English words are of French origin, it's not because French is beautiful but because England was a colony of France for nearly two centuries.

3) Explain the 'French language Paradox' in your book to the magazine readers.

JB: The word on the street has it that French is a language with no future, a precious but silly language that needs an academy of so called immortals to rule it, and language police to protect it. It's a caricature, but we frequently hear and read arguments about how French is going down the tubes, and not just from the English press. Yet as we said earlier, the numbers tell a different story. French is the official language of two G-8 countries and three prosperous European nations. In Canada, there are more bilingual English Canadians than there are native francophones! To put it mildly, French still has a considerable power of attraction.

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JBN: Sure, English has to some extent pushed French out of international diplomacy and international business, but French remains an important language of diplomacy, of science and of business and a language of social promotion in many countries. I don't think French is finished in the UN and international business. There are many signs that francophones are making language an international issue the way they made language a national issue in Canada. The world's francophones are the second language group, after the Anglo-Americans, to grasp how language is an issue of power, and many are willing to fight the battle.

JB: Many people view the language protection measures in Quebec and France as signs of weakness, decrying them as backward measures and an attempt to set back the clocks. But did you know that when Quebec created its language laws in 1977, it was the last Canadian province to do so? Most language laws in Canada until then at been directed either at protecting English or at forcing the assimilation of French speakers. As we argue in The Story of French, language protection is not reactionary, it's proactive. It's about keeping French modern and relevant.

4) What role does Canada, especially Quebec, play in supporting the preservation of the French language internationally?

JB: Canadians – not just Quebeckers – played a central role in the development of international francophone institutions like the Official Francophonie, TV5 and the Agence universitaire de la francophonie. Many people realize now that French is not just about France, but about the world.

JBN: There is a big debate going on in the business world right now between the validity of the Common Law and the Civil Code. Much of this is rooted in language. Did you know that Canada is one of the few places in the world where Common Law is practiced in French?

JB: We also made a surprising discovery. A lot more people consult Quebec's bank of terminology than the French Academy. The number of hits on the Quebec site is 50 million per year, as opposed to 2 million for the Academy – and half hits on the Quebec site come from Europe!

5) What kind of opportunities for cooperation with francophones in other parts of the world exist and how successful are they?

JB: The entire sphere of communication is up for grabs right now because, aside from TV5, nobody has done anything to create international francophone media with real ambition. That said, we were quite impressed by the level of action at the Agence universitaire de la francophonie, which is networking hundreds of francophone institutions. Some of their programs are quite dynamic, like the ones in east and central Europe. The movement of francophones in the sectors of culture and intellectual life is impressive. Traditionally, all of this movement was through Paris. Nowadays – and this is a new phenomenon – Algerian and

Moroccan scholars are coming straight to, say, Sherbrooke University to do their Ph.Ds and to work as professors.

JBN: Our language policies in Canada are the result of two centuries of vigorous action on the part of private associations, conventions – and even a rebellion. In a way, there is still more initiative coming from individuals and private institutions like universities, associations or companies than governments, for whom real cooperation is always difficult. The first moves towards forming a francophonie came from private initiatives of Canadians, French, Belgians and Africans. Their ideas were then recuperated by governments and built into foreign policies.

6) To what extent has the French language become a globalizing force on its own?

JB: Until recently, the global influence of French was mostly a question of France, Belgium and Switzerland's foreign policy. But something new has been going on since the 1950s, and has picked up momentum since the 1990s. Francophones everywhere decided that it was time for action. French Canadians and Acadians, under the leadership of Quebec – but not exclusively – decided that merely surviving was not enough: that really was at the root of the Quiet Revolution, which produced landslide changes both in Quebec and New Brunswick.

JBN: Today we are seeing unprecedented movement within the francophonie: Belgium is involved in international aid projects in countries that were not former colonies. Thanks to Canadian initiatives, most Senegalese journalists are getting training in Canada and know the country well. Quebec cinema is driving the Canadian film industry. American universities study francophone literature from Africa. Acadian doctors are trained at Sherbrooke Univeristy – which, by the way created Morocco's first MBA program.

JB: And in spite of their current depressed mood, the French are pushing hard internationally. Their multinationals are gigantic and very profitable. Their civil nuclear energy program was quoted as an example by George Bush. France is still a huge international locomotive, exporting in all sorts of fields and maintaining a very high degree of quality of research and science and industry. The Anglo-American press seems to deliberately ignore this.

7) What do you think of the future of the French language, internationally and here in Canada?

JBN: Of all international languages, French has the particularity of being a minority language everywhere but in its country of origin. Yet it is used extensively in many countries, largely because at the time of decolonization, many elites decided to use French to get access to industry and science – in short, it became the language of modernization. The future of French in these places will depend on the politics of each place, and in other place, on the will of minorities to survive.

JB: It is hard to say where French is going in Canada. It depends on a lot of things. Will Canadian universities wake up to the fact that French is not just another foreign language and that Canadians really can't afford to remain monolingual? Will francophones outside of Quebec hold to their language? Will Quebec's birth rate increase? Will Quebec separate? Or get some kind of new status in Canada? There are a lot of things that could affect the future of French here.

JBN: I would say that one of the key issues will be whether the French in France decide to reach to other francophones. Odd as it sounds, the French do not consider themselves francophones – francophones to them are other people who speak French, and the term has colonial connotations to them. My guess is that if Canada and Quebec take more leadership in the francophonie, the French will wake up. The same thing will happen if francophone countries decide to create a new international norm for French, perhaps via an international Academy that would displace the French Academy. It could happen.

JB: So as you see, there are still some chapters in the Story of French left to write. But those will be for another book.