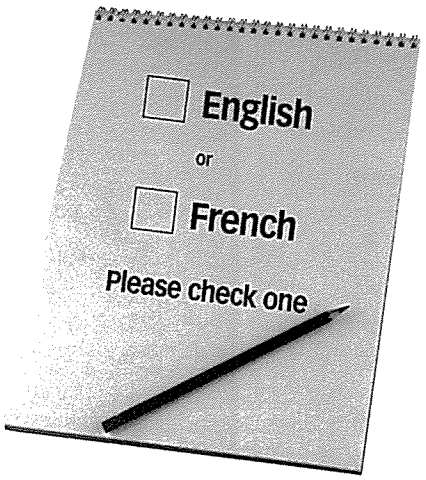
"PLEASE CHECK ONE": METAPHORS OF BICULTURALISM IN CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP APPLICATIONS



ABSTRACT

The idea of biculturalism as it was framed in the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism has enjoyed a certain lingering presence in our national mythology. How has this image been textually reproduced through time? A contemporary citizenship application provides a glimpse into how the Canadian state manages its bicultural image.

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The notion of Canada as a bicultural nation built upon the efforts of "two founding peoples" was a key premise at the core of the 1963 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. While multiculturalism and reminders of the prior occupancy status of Aboriginal peoples have suggested a reworking of the paramount status afforded French and English Canadian identities, the idea of biculturalism, as it was framed in the Commission's report, has continued to enjoy a privileged position in our national mythology. How has this image been textually reproduced over time by the Canadian nation-state? What do the texts that citizens and would-be citizens engage with for routine bureaucratic procedures say about the contemporary salience of biculturalism? Are there ways in which the continuing presence of this historic reality shuts out other cultural pluralities?

To a considerable degree, our understanding of Canada's cultural identity is affected by the images that we see in circulation in any particular moment. At one level, this is a question of marketing: if we think that we are a peace-loving nation, it is because we have been taught to see ourselves in such a way through dominant representations of the "typical Canadian" (leaving aside, for the moment, whether these are accurate representations or not). On a more subversive level, the marketing of national character and identity can be seen as evidence of ideology at work. To begin to unearth latent assumptions regarding the nation and its citizenry, textual analysis – a good, close reading of what a text is saying and what that same text is suggesting we, as readers, should think and do – can be particularly helpful.

Sociological analysis is apposite to this endeavour, notably, the work of Dorothy Smith, who in 1990 in *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling* suggested that much can be gained from seeing texts not just as repositories of information, but as "phenomena in their own right" (120). From this critical perspective, the term "texts" is expansive, describing not only conventional literary texts, but also advertisements, forms, television programs, and any other type of communication that is textually mediated. These texts, when closely scrutinized, can help us discover what is taken for granted on the part of the authors and those individuals who take up the text in the course of their day-to-day work. Such

assumptions have myriad implications for the way we live our lives.

Put another way, texts affect what we think and what we do. They influence both our physical actions (for instance, we may donate to a charitable organization after reading an article in the news-paper) *and*, more subversively, they affect the thought processes that we embark on as a result of taking up the text. Such actions are rarely accidental; often, they are designed towards specific ends by corporations, organizations, government agencies, and other institutions that have a vested interest in maintaining or instituting certain values and seeing some types of processes carried out over others.

The ideological dimensions of the Canadian state's approach to biculturalism can be read through the nation's official documents. At the most obvious level, these documents include the policies and articles of legislation that frame the rules of the land; more covertly, however, they include the general documents taken up by average Canadians or would-be Canadians. Such texts might include income tax forms and health card applications, to name but two examples. Exploring the texts that we routinely encounter in our interactions with the Canadian nation-state is a helpful way of getting at how a particular image of Canada and the "Canadian citizen" is reinforced and perpetuated in Canadian society.

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One such text that contains a representation of biculturalism is the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada's *Application for Canadian Citizenship – Adults (18 years of age and older): Under Subsection 5(1)* and its companion set of instructions. This form is one of several applications available to individuals seeking Canadian citizenship. Its intended users are permanent residents/landed immigrants 18 years of age or older who have fulfilled the residency requirements for Canadian citizenship and consider themselves likely to pass the citizenship tests (emphasizing language proficiency and knowledge of the country's history, geography, and government structure). The utility of the form is, on one level, obvious; information about applicants is gleaned through a series of logical questions that solicit data about an individual's suitability as a Canadian citizen. But the application works at another level as well. As a form that would-be Canadians must complete, this document also acts as a textual intermediary for the Canadian nation-state. It is a representation, in other words, of Canada itself for those who engage with it. Consequently, it is an ideal text to analyze in order to determine how biculturalism is presented to aspiring Canadian citizens.

At first glance, the *Application for Canadian Citizenship* asserts itself visually through multiple text boxes and lines that emphasize the categorical nature of the information being sought; the actual substantive portion of the form itself is characterized by several types of questions. Some are framed as "either/or" postulates, while others require a "yes" or "no" response. Still others ask for detailed factual information (addresses, names, etc) that will be used by department officials in determining the eligibility of the applicant for Canadian citizenship.

In the categories presented as "either/or" options, the notion of Canada as a bicultural nation first appears: users must choose between service in "English **or** French" and are specifically instructed to "please check one" of the options given. On one level, these alternatives represent the very real capacity of the Canadian nation-state to provide service in English or French. At a more ideological level, however, such categorization also assumes that individuals will fit into one of these binaries or the other – but not both. Thus, would-be citizens must straightaway make a decision between English or French as their "official" language of communication. Bilingualism is not presented as an option here, suggesting a resolute divide between the archetypal "two solitudes" of Canada's colonizing cultures. The addition of a third option requesting "either" language for service would send a different meaning to the applicant; namely, that the distance between English and French is not so great as to be insurmountable and indeed, that the idea of functioning ably across two cultures is altogether possible.

In the sections of the application that ask for more detailed responses, the notion of biculturalism again appears as a choice between two relatively separate entities. At question 4(B), applicants are asked to provide legal name change documents if they have changed their name since coming to Canada. Additional information given below this line tells applicants to "[s]ee instructions in Section 4 about Quebec issued documents." Here, the focus shifts from a distinction along strictly linguistic lines to one based on provincial affiliation. At face value, this instruction logically reflects the reality that Quebec has its own legal and judicial system, based on the French Civil Code (as opposed to common law). But at a more abstract level, the special instruction here serves to insert Quebec's difference into this Canadian government document, underscoring the fact that this is a region separate from other provinces and territories. While such an assertion is by no means untrue – Quebec *is* different and has been since the nation was formed – it nevertheless contributes to a notion of biculturalism that emphasizes, once again, the very *separate* nature of the two founding cultures.

This framing of Quebec as a separate entity with respect to the rest of Canada is repeated further along in the form when applicants are asked to indicate whether they would like their name included on voters' lists. Two types of lists are described: the "National Register of Electors," which ensures that signatories are "included on the list of electors for federal elections and referendums" and "Quebec's Permanent

List of Electors," which includes the names of people who wish to be put on "the list of electors for provincial, municipal or school elections." Again, such a framing is necessarily the result of requirements stemming out of Quebec's unique legal and judicial system. But the implicit suggestion once again is that biculturalism means separate spheres with separate procedures. Additional confusion comes into play with this particular question because of the fact that British Columbia also has its own permanent list of electors. Permanent residents/landed immigrants applying for citizenship from British Columbia might well wonder why the opportunity to have their names included on this province's list of electors is not similarly presented as an option here.

French and English Canada (and Quebec and the rest of Canada) are framed throughout this document as separate entities that do not intermingle to any significant extent. But the ideological differences embedded in the application do not stop there. The very fact that an added step ("see instructions in section 4") is required to uncover information about Quebec issued documents serves, I would argue, as a type of narrative deferral. Moreover, this is the first section where users are told to go *outside* the application proper to an entirely new text (the instruction guide) in order to glean information about the Quebec case. Thus the deferral is a profound one, requiring as it does an extra-textual move away from the citizenship application to a supplementary, supporting document.

When the user turns to the instruction guide for additional information about Quebec issued documents, this deferral may transform into confusion. The instructions referred to at section 4(B) on the form do not assist the applicant in procuring special information about "Quebec issued documents." Instead, a note at the end of this section refers the user to yet another part of the guide, a section ambiguously titled "Documents" which, because it is not included in the Table of Contents, may be difficult to find.

This repeated deferral — from application to instruction guide to table of contents in a perhaps futile search for the instructions in question — is tantamount to a narrative "run-around"; as such, it serves to position Quebec in the hinterland of the citizenship application, increasingly inaccessible and incomprehensible to the average user. This framing acts as a metaphor for the way in which the phenomenon of biculturalism, while supporting the notion of two seminal cultures, does not necessarily mean equality of opportunity or access for each of the founding peoples it seeks to circumscribe.

Inasmuch as the way in which biculturalism is presented in the citizenship application points to the separate spheres of French and English Canadian identity, and the displacement of Quebec relative to the rest of Canada, so too does it elide other realities. For instance, the choice of receiving service in either English or French which, on a practical level, addresses the needs of Canada's "two founding peoples," simultaneously negates the possibility of other languages of communication, most notably Aboriginal languages (oral or written). In this way, the ideological dominance of Canada's colonizing languages is shored up, becoming something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in its every incarnation. Another reality that gets glossed over in the emphasis on biculturalism is Nunavut. Characterized by a majority of Inuit residents and the predominance of the Inuktitut language, Canada's newest territory has its own degree of cultural specificity that predates concepts of French and English identity in North America. This reality is not apparent from the citizenship application.

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All of these metaphorical readings, one might argue, are to some extent moot if the framing of different portions of the citizenship application is seen only as a function of efficiency and reality. Canada has two official languages, so the argument would go; as a result, service is offered in French and English, and nothing else. Similarly, Quebec has its own unique legal and judicial system; hence, its processes surrounding name changes and voters' lists are necessarily different, requiring distinct instructions on the application form. Reading these sections as meta-phors for something more insidious is, one might protest, both unhelpful and unsupportable.

Such a response, I would argue, is insufficient because it does not adequately deal with the question of how texts actually work to structure or perpetuate certain assumptions. Nor does it attempt to get underneath ideology, as it were, to explore what we take for granted about our national identity. This point was made somewhat differently by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. In this now classic text, the author notes the importance of, among other things, daily newspapers in achieving a cohesive sense of identity across members of a disparate populace. The repeated rearticulation of foundational myths through textually mediated forms (whether newspapers or citizenship applications) is a seminal means of enforcing or reinforcing the hegemonic status quo – in other words, of maintaining the way things simply *are*.

Thus, we walk away from the Canadian citizenship application with the understanding that we can ally ourselves with only English *or* French when it comes to the Canadian state (never mind Aboriginal, Latino/a, South Asian, or any of a host of other identities). As well, we learn that Quebec is not just different but oftentimes paradoxically, even vexingly so. Moreover, it is the only province or territory singled out for its socio-cultural specificity. Indeed, the notion of biculturalism is present here in this Canadian citizenship application; the question now is whether the metaphors it suggests are appropriate, damaging, or somewhere in between.