IT'S "NATURAL" TO SPEAK ENGLISH...

At the Alberta Francophone Games



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The Alberta Francophone Games (AFG) were established in 1992 to provide, like other sport events in the country for francophone youth, a context that was French-speaking and a cultural environment where youths could enjoy themselves. Open to all 12 to 18 year old Albertans who can speak French, the Games are a means to counter assimilation and retain teenagers in francophone ranks, thereby ensuring a lasting francophone community in Alberta. However, they have been bedeviled by debates. Who, for example, counts as a francophone? And how much can organizers, for whom the real purpose of the Games is to promote a francophone agenda, insist that participants speak French during the weekend-long event? The issues discussed below are extracted from my doctoral research, entitled The Alberta Francophone Games: A question of identity in which the reproduction of francophone identities among young people is examined in the context of this sport and cultural event.

When I asked participants what they thought of the fact that many of the youths at the AFG spoke English, two teenagers — both of whom spoke French as a first language and attended francophone schools- clearly stated, in two separate interviews, that staging a large event — even if it included participants who would inevitably speak English at some point during the weekend — was more important than holding it completely in French.

Je pense qu'on parlait de si c'est correct qu'il y a des personnes qui parlent en anglais [aux JFA]. Bien moi je trouve que ça serait mieux si les personnes parlaient plutôt en français. Mais j'aimerais mieux avoir beaucoup de personnes qui sont là, et il y en a qui parlent en anglais, que d'en avoir pas beaucoup, tout le monde parle en français. (Edmonton/E, 1997).

Après une secousse, tu veux juste du monde qui vient. Qu'ils parlent quatre mots de français, ça ne fait rien. [...] On veut qu'il y ait du monde qui vient. (Jean Côté/E, 1997).

They argued that the greater the number of participants, the more enjoyable and interesting the Games would be, and that, according to them, was better than restricting the event to youths who would speak French throughout the weekend. The performance of the French language was preferable, but certainly not a priority for these participants.

AFG founders and organizers viewed sport as a lure to attract youths, and it was indeed sport that drew participants. Questionnaire and interview results demonstrated that participants were aware of the requirement to speak French throughout the weekend, and they agreed, in principle, with the purpose of the Games to promote "francophoneness". However, they attended the AFG primarily to practice sports and to have fun. In most cases, the francophoneness of the event was incidental to their motivation to participate.[1] Furthermore, participants expected the AFG to be similar to modern organized sport. Their expectations concerning organizational and sporting know-how were clearly stated in their evaluations of the Games. For instance, they complained about incompetent officials and referees, long waiting periods, the taste and lack of food, poorly organized transportation, the damaged running track, the volleyball courts being too small, poorly organized track and field competitions, early bedtimes and early mornings, and the need for medals.

The results of the participant evaluations conducted by organizers were certainly not all negative. Some youths were evidently satisfied and enjoyed their experience at the AFG. What is significant here is that the majority of their comments, positive or negative, pointed to sport and organizational considerations. Evaluations and interviews revealed that participants were more concerned with having fun and enjoying the sport competitions in an organized setting than with living an experience entirely in French. Indeed, the particular configuration of sport and francophone discourses at the AFG produced a situation where youths acknowledged the francophone agenda of the Games, but were attracted by their sporting character and did not necessarily comply with the official requirement to speak French. Much interaction between participants was, in fact, conducted in English — to the point that it is not at all obvious that the Games provided youths with a weekend "in French". Teenagers did speak French, or tried to, when they communicated with organizers, volunteers, chefs de mission, sports officials,[2] and coaches. However, many of them used

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English widely in their informal conversations — in other words for most communication. Thus, at this very basic level, the francophoneness of AFG participants was a fact much more complicated than might appear.

Bernard (1998) observed that minority francophone youths in Canada wished to retain their francophone language and culture and wanted to pass it on to their children. One of the AFG participants clearly expressed this wish in a written statement produced at the end of the interview: "J'espère garder ma langue pour enfin la montrer à mes enfants. Ma langue est IMPORTANTE[3] pour moi." (Drawing/statement #26, AFG/E8, 1997).[4] The paradox, Bernard (1998) noted, was that these youths primarily lived their life in English. This, I argue, is what fundamentally set AFG participants apart from organizers. French-speaking youths' spontaneous use of English to converse with each other was a discursive practice that contributed to the construction of their distinct hybrid identity, merging francophone and anglophone identities.

A: Comme nous autres on n'est pas, on parle toujours comme un peu des deux langues. On va dire un peu en français...
B: On mélange les deux.
A: Mais, on ne va jamais avoir une conversation complètement en français. Il va toujours y avoir des mots en anglais. (Edmonton/E, 1997).

These young people considered it 'normal' for them to mix the two languages, since French and English were ultimately part of who they were.

- C'est dure de ne pas parler anglais. Parce qu'on parle anglais tout le temps.
- Oui. C'est notre environnement parce qu'on parle anglais tout le temps.
- C'est drôle parler en français.
[...]
- Oui, c'est naturel de parler l'anglais.
- Mais, je sais pas. On essaie.
- Des fois. (AFG/E3, 1997).

Organizers lived a larger part of their own francophoneness routinely. The strategic dimension of their francophone identity was manifested in their concern for the community, in the importance they placed on supporting community institutions and activities. For example, rather than listening to an English-speaking radio station, they would tune in to CHFA, even if they were not necessarily satisfied with its programming. AFG participants, on the contrary, experienced their personal francophoneness as a project that constantly required work. Speaking French was, for them, a rehearsed and conscious exercise; they viewed the Games as a context where they could "practice" their French. Still, many of them evidently did not think that it was necessary to speak French at all times to identify as a francophone, nor did they all consider the performance of French at the Games a priority; for them, the presence of English was not an issue.

What distinguished participants from organizers was that participants, for the most part, explained their francophoneness in terms of a conscious and strategic project. Youth francophone identities were not lived unproblematically at the individual level. Even if some participants expressed an emotional and essentializing attachment to the French language and/or francophone culture, the majority of them stressed that they had to make a conscious effort to maintain their ability to communicate in French. Whereas for organizers, who were from older generations, speaking French was more of a spontaneous practice, for the youths that participated in the Games it was an intentional undertaking — whether they claimed it as their first language or not. Organizers had referred to the strategic dimension of francophone identity in terms of the necessity to contribute to community building and participate in francophone institutions. Conversely, teenagers lived their francophoneness as a responsibility, and had to constantly work at its production, quite apart from thinking about their obligations towards the collectivity. ■

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1. The francophoneness of the AFG did not necessarily attract the youths who took part in the event, but neither did it deter them from participating. Conversely, it appears to have been a reason other French speaking youths refused to participate. At a General Council meeting, some chefs de mission reported that the francophoneness of the Games did bother some teenagers, mostly French immersion students. These potential participants refused to attend because they did not consider francophone events "cool" (Dallaire, 1996-1997). For these youths, then, the francophoneness of the AFG was more significant than their sporting character. At any rate, these were not really the teenagers that organizers wished to attract.
2. Except, of course, when addressing English-speaking officials who could not communicate in French, such as the volleyball officials at the 1996 AFG.
3. In capital letters in the original
4. The fact that at fifteen years old, this young French speaker was already consciously articulating the desire to transmit her language to her future children points to the problematic character of her francophoneness. If her language- i.e., her own fluency, or the political and social status of French in Alberta and Canada- had not been weakened or threatened, she would not have thought about it: that her children would have spoken French would have been a given.