

Status and Distribution of Languages for Education in Canada

Alister Cumming, CERLL, OISE

Canada has 2 official, dominant languages; 11 families of more than 50 indigenous languages; over 200 immigrant or international languages used in certain homes and communities; and 2 commonly used sign languages. Educational programs and societal conditions related to these languages vary greatly throughout the country (Edwards, 2008). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) provides legal rights to an interpreter in one of these languages, where needed, in a court or tribunal.

English and French as Official Languages. Shortly after Canada's founding constitution in 1867, 61% of the resident population claimed to be British origin and 31% to be of French origin, but it was not until the Official Languages Acts of 1969 and 1988 that English and French were designated as the country's two official languages and media for all federal government services (Lachapelle & Lepage, 2011). The constitution gave each province, rather than the federal government, unique responsibilities for education. In the French-dominant province of Québec, English has the status of a minority language. In the other English-dominant provinces, French has minority language status, except for New Brunswick, which is the only officially bilingual province. Ontario has a policy of regionalized bilingualism (in 25 regions of the province) and operates separate school systems in English and in French. In the territory of Nunavut, Inuktitut is used by the majority of inhabitants, so both English and French have minority language status. Canada's 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees education in their mother tongue to all Canadians of English or French heritage. In the 2011 Census, about 58% of the Canadian population (presently about 35 million) reported English as their mother tongue, whereas 22% reported French as their mother tongue, including about 6 million francophones residing in Québec and about 1 million francophones residing in other parts of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012). Only about 17% of the Canadian population are functionally bilingual in English and French, however, and the majority of these people live in or around three cities—Montréal, Moncton, and Ottawa—with smaller but distinct numbers in such cities as Québec, Sherbrooke, and Sudbury (Lachapelle & Lepage, 2011).

Indigenous Languages. Speakers of numerous indigenous languages have resided throughout the regions called Canada for up to 10,000 years. In the 2011 Census, about 213,000 people reported to be active users of indigenous languages and almost 1.5 million people to be of aboriginal heritage (Statistics Canada, 2012). The Algonquian, Athapaskan, Inuit, and Siouan language families are presently used by a sufficient number of people to be thought viable for continued future use (Patrick, 2013). The Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibway languages are used most widely—by two-thirds of the active speakers of indigenous languages (Statistics Canada, 2012). The Haida, Iroquoian, Kutenai, Salishan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Wakashan language families, in spite of being taught and revitalized in some communities, have so few active speakers that their long-term vitality is seriously endangered (Patrick, 2013). Indigenous peoples reside across Canada in diverse locations, including more than 600 recognized First Nations governments or bands, some with official treaties, particularly in western Canada, but the status of most are in relation to the Indian Act of 1876 (and subsequent amendments and case law), which gave the federal (rather than any provincial) government responsibilities for the land of indigenous peoples but did not specify any educational policies to support indigenous languages.

Immigrant, Heritage, or International Languages. The Multiculturalism Acts of 1971 and 1988 encourage the maintenance of all languages arising from aboriginal or immigrant ancestry, though funding, policies, and programs to support these aims are limited, often based on local initiatives as well as agreements between some of the provincial governments and the federal government, which holds basic responsibility for immigration. Policies for official bilingualism in English and French prevail over policies related to other languages. In the 2011 Census of Canada, almost 6.6 million people, or 20% of Canada's total population, reported using a language other than English or French most frequently at home, including 200 international languages as well as indigenous and sign languages (Statistics Canada, 2012). More than 80% of the people who use an international language (other than English or French) at home reside in or around just five cities—Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, or Ottawa—and an additional 6% in a few other cities in southern Ontario and in Winnipeg. In the greater Toronto area, nearly 2 million people frequently use a language other than English or French at home, most commonly either a Chinese language (15.8%, mostly Cantonese), Punjabi (8.0%), Urdu (5.9%), or Tamil (5.7%) (Statistics Canada, 2012). About 250,000 immigrants and refugee claimants have settled in Canada annually in recent decades, forming the primary basis for population growth in the country and increasing at a rate four times faster than the Canadian-born population (Lachapelle & Lepage, 2011).

Sign Languages. American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des Signes Québécoise (LSQ) are the two sign languages commonly used in Canada. ASL has been recognized officially as a minority language in Manitoba since 1988, Alberta since 1990, and Ontario since 1993. About 25,000 people reported to be users of sign languages in the 2011 Census (Statistics Canada, 2012).

References

- Burnaby, B. (2008). Language policy and education in Canada. In S. May & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed.), Vol. 1: *Language policy and political issues in education* (pp. 331-341). New York: Springer.
- Duff, P. & Li, D. (2009). Indigenous, minority, and heritage language education in Canada: Policies, contexts, and issues. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 66 (1), 1-8.
- Edwards, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Language in Canada*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lachapelle, R. & Lepage, J. (2011). *Languages in Canada: 2006 census*. Ottawa: Canadian Heritage and Statistics Canada. Retrieved October 20, 2014 from http://www.pch.gc.ca/DAMAssetPub/DAM-pgmLo-olPgm/STAGING/texte-text/10-160_PCH-LanguesAuCanada_1358887628925_eng.pdf?WT.contentAuthority=10.1
- Patrick, D. (2013). Endangered languages in Canada. In C. Chapelle (Ed.) *The Encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0371
- Statistics Canada. (2012). *Linguistic characteristics of Canadians: Language, 2011 census*. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry. Retrieved October 20, 2014 from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-314-x/98-314-x2011001-eng.pdf>