

## BILINGUALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADA

How can there be a language policy that requires people to work in two official languages while expecting them to identify with one nation? The following paper considers this paradox through an examination of the Canadian model of bilingualism and multiculturalism. Through an exploration of concepts such as bilingualism, nation, identity, multiculturalism, official language, federal and citizen, it is argued that Canada's model of bilingualism and multiculturalism is flawed. It is also argued that language is tied to a person's identity, and that cultural codes, ideologies, a nation's soul and its heritage all contribute to the making of national identity. Through an analysis of these concepts, it is shown that the policy of bilingualism contradicts the idea of what it means to be a nation and what it means to have national identity.

Canada has been built on a tradition of bilingualism and multiculturalism. A bilingual person is a person who is fluent in or speaks two languages. In Canada the term bilingualism is used to refer to the policy of bilingualism, the policy of two official languages, French and English. Any citizen of Canada is entitled to conduct their public affairs in one of the two official languages (Hudon, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

A person's national identity is that of the country they belong to, the country they are citizens of. People comprise a nation and their national identity is that which defines who the conglomerate of people are that make the nation (Francis, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). Identity is loosely defined in the social sciences as the "feeling that one belongs to, a society or a group within a society" (Matthews, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*). Language is also essential to one's identity (Chan qtd. in Fraser 84).

Multiculturalism is the notion that all members of a society can live together as equal citizens without one person's cultural identity taking precedence over another's. Rather than assimilating to a mainstream culture, individuals integrate, each retaining their own cultural identity (Lack, *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*). This is the theoretical basis that Canadians have traditionally used to differentiate their approach to immigration from that of the United States of America. Americans have theoretically adopted a model of a "melting pot" while Canadians have theoretically adopted that of a "mosaic" (Francis, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

Indigenous peoples lived in Canada centuries before the European explorers arrived on its shores (Landry and Forgues 1). The creation of Canada, however, *as a country* and *as a nation founded on two national languages* was the result of

colonialist policies of France and England during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Between 1534 - 1536 Jacques Cartier was sent by the King of France to discover a northwest passage to the East. Instead he discovered the St Lawrence River. Samuel de Champlain followed in 1603 - 1615, along with French missionaries and fur traders. The area around the St Lawrence River was known as La Nouvelle-France (New France). The British had established a stronghold in Canada having settled around Hudson Bay, establishing various trading posts in the area known as Rupert's Land (Hudson's Bay Company) (Ostler 412-413). French and English were the two languages of the colony of Canada. "It is estimated that in 1791 there were 140,000 francophones (French speakers) and 20,000 anglophones (English speakers) in Canada . . . In 1998 the country's population had reached 30.5 million, of whom 6.7 million or 22 per cent spoke French natively, as against 60 per cent brought up to speak English" (Ostler 415).

In 1867, the Canadian constitution, the *British North America Act* was written. It united the five colonies of British North America and created an independent Canada giving "formal status to the French language – for the first time in Canada's history" (Nadeau and Barlow 219). This *Act* made mandatory the use of French and English in the courts and parliament in both the province of Quebec and at the federal level (Nadeau and Barlow 219).

In 1967 the Canadian Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism released its *Report on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Canada*. The *Report* recommended that English and French be formally declared as official languages of all federal institutions. The Government of Canada's first *Official Languages Act* was passed in 1969 (revised 1988). This *Act* provided for the formal recognition of both English and French as the official languages of Canada and ensured that they be given equal status, rights and privileges in all federal institutions (Frideres 3). The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was passed and enshrined in the constitution in 1982. The promotion of two official languages, French and English had become a priority in Canada (Hudon, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

The picture this presents is that of one nation, Canada, having two official languages, French and English. There is a "recognition of two distinct and dominant cultures, one French-speaking and one English-speaking" (Hudon, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

Based on the definitions of what it is to be a nation, does Canada's model fit the criteria? According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a nation is "a large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture . . . so as to form a distinct people." In 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe the idea of nationalism emerged; one definition being that a nation is defined by a common ancestry, common religion and/or a common language (Palmowski, *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History*). A nation is defined by one common language, one common culture.

In 1882 Ernest Renan wrote a paper entitled “What is a Nation?”. Renan had another interpretation of the word nation. He posited that a nation is “*not* based on ethnic principle” and “*is not* based on a linguistic principle” (Renan qtd. in Lagree 29). Renan’s perspective, as summarized by Lagree, is that “a nation is fusion, the fusion of different peoples who forge an historical identity” (Lagree 30).

Canada’s policies do not fit any of the interpretations of what it means to be a nation; there are two official languages (i.e. *a linguistic principle*), (Renan); there is *not a common language*, (OED). There is a multicultural approach (i.e. *an ethnic principle*), (Renan); there is *not one common culture or ancestry* (OED). Forging an historical identity through the fusion of different peoples is not possible when there are two distinct and dominant cultures. Canada by definition is not a fusion.

The mandate of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, was “to inquire into . . . the state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop . . . an equal partnership on the two founding races” (Bourgeois 15). An equal partnership is not a fusion. An equal partnership does not imply common descent, common language or common culture. The mandate of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was not consistent with the definition of what it means to be a nation.

The recommendations of the Royal Commission were more symbolic than practical, in terms of forging a nation. “Cultural and linguistic equality would be guaranteed by two symbolic gestures: an official languages act at the national level and bilingual districts at the local level” (Bourgeois 9). Symbolism does not equate with practicality. Although an official languages act at the national level was adopted, the implementation of bilingual districts at the local level never took place. Bilingual districts may have promoted cultural and linguistic equality but the two “gestures” would not have guaranteed the creation of a nation (i.e. an aggregate of individuals united by common factors).

What is an official language? The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics (Matthews) defines an official language as “*one* recognized or approved for use in the administration of a country or some other political unit.” Canada’s policy of *two* official languages is by definition contradictory.

Is there a connection between an official language and national identity? As Canada’s history unfolded, so did its policies around language and culture. In 1977, Bill 101, the *Charter of the French Language*, was adopted by the government of Quebec (Linteau, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). French became the sole official language of Quebec. There were no longer two official languages operating within the provincial political unit. Native speaking francophones living in Quebec continued to identify themselves as Quebecois, an appellation which had been in use since the 1960’s (Nadeau and Barlow 213). “Quebec nationalists . . . no longer

felt they shared a common national identity with all French-speaking Canada. They saw themselves as part of an emerging identity based on a common language, French, and a precise territory, Quebec” (Martel, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). There is a connection between an official language and national identity in Quebec. This “Quiet Revolution” resulted in the emergence of a different sense of self-identification among French Canadians and a revised definition of the French-Canadian nation (Martel, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

*“The Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada”*

- *Preamble to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act*  
(Kunz and Sykes 6)

Prior to the introduction of Bill 101 in Quebec, Canada’s policies around bilingualism and biculturalism had started to shift. In 1971, the then Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliott Trudeau proclaimed “there is no official (Canadian) culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly” (Troper, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). The notion of multiculturalism was introduced into Canadian policy. The importance of this paradigm shift was that Canadian identity was being re-defined. Its parameters were no longer confined to English and French but rather “Canadian identity must be seen to embrace the contributions of all Canadians . . . The policy pledged government assistance to Canadians in developing and sharing the nation’s diverse cultural richness” (Troper, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*) and was made law through the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* which was introduced in 1988 (Kunz and Sykes 7). *The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* passed in 2001 provided legislation pertaining to immigrants and refugees (Frideres 3).

The accumulation of these various pieces of legislation and policies was intended to create a framework and foundation for the Canadian model of what it is to be a Canadian (i.e. Canada’s national identity). “All of this differs radically from the prior “Two Founding Nations” perspective that Canadians held so dear” (Frideres 3). But, the “new” Canadian model created a paradox. Canada’s history of colonialism by the French and the British, the adoption of policies around two languages (bilingualism) and two cultures (biculturalism), and an overarching policy of multiculturalism, contributed to the creation of a country and a nation with a multifaceted, undefinable national identity. As Francis states “Paradoxically, while cultural diversity provided Canadians with a new way of describing their society, it

also made a single national identity increasingly problematic” (Francis, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

What is the significance of one’s native language to the preservation of their identity? A person’s identity is closely tied to their language. Ferdinand de Saussure was a linguist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose work was key to the argument that *language has a paramount place in understanding* the workings of ideology and cultural codes, and more broadly *the operations of identity* and difference (Calhoun, *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*). His work echoes that of an earlier philosopher, Cratylus, who according to the dialogue by Plato on the origin of language stated “all words in all languages are by nature appropriate to the things they describe, being imitations of them, but in language there are also elements of chance, of design, and of convention (Howatson and Chilvers, *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*). One’s identity is tied to the “things they describe” and yet to “elements of chance” and “of convention” (i.e. to their language). If one’s national identity is founded on *two* official languages, their ideology and cultural codes are compromised. It is problematic having differing ideologies and cultural codes. If a person is to preserve their identity through use of their native language, the notion of two official languages confuses that identity. What is their identity? It cannot be imposed. “It (is) . . . evident that in Canada, national identity is a contested concept, and that attempts to imagine or impose a single identity can be misguided, even destructive” (Francis, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*).

Language rights are enshrined in Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Floch 57). Professor O’Hear asks “what, then, gives the language, culture, and collective experience of a group its particular identity? And he answers, “Herder argued that an individual could develop *spiritually only within a national community* . . . the values of different nations are incommensurable and criticizable only from within” (O’Hear, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*). Canada’s current situation of one official language in Quebec, and two official languages at the federal level, does not support the development of the individual in a Canadian (national) community or as part of a collective experience. And from Renan’s perspective “a nation is a *soul, a spiritual principle* . . . (it) is the shared possession of a rich legacy of memories of the past, the other is a consent in the present . . . to make the most of an undivided heritage”(Renan qtd. in Lagree 30). Canada’s policies have not led to *shared possession of a legacy of memories*. With the current model, Canadians are not able to have an *undivided heritage*.

Canada’s model is flawed. The premises upon which it is founded are contradictory as evidenced in the analysis of the relationship of language to national identity provided by Stacy Churchill. She comments on official and non-official languages in the Canadian model of integration and citizenship. She is critical of the Canadian model, stating that, “the discourse on multiculturalism and citizenship is often considered to be primarily *an immigrant issue*; the discourse on official languages duality is often dismissed as a remnant of the past somehow related to

*political battles about national unity* but with little relevance for citizenship integration” (17). There is no mention of a *soul*, of a *spiritual principle* (Renan’s notion) in the discourse that Churchill describes nor is there reference to a *feeling that one belongs to a society* (Matthews’ notion). There is not one national community that *an individual can develop spiritually within* (Herder’s notion). And furthermore, inconsistency around the use of French and English *within* and *among* the provinces as evidenced by the Quebec’s language laws has been a divisive rather than uniting factor in Canadian identity (Martel, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). “They are two regimes which oppose and mutually nullify each other” (Theriault 129). Canadians are unable to have a national identity based on their language.

Who are we? This question is implied in the title of a book by Rudyard Griffiths, *Who We Are*. According to Jennifer Welsh, Griffiths looks at the essence of what it means to be Canadian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and concludes that there is no clear answer. He argues that national identity is secondary to regional loyalties. Canada is “a nation of citizens, not a collection of communities.” Canada as a nation is one of de-centralized federalism (Welsh F9).

What is federalism and what is citizenship? How do these concepts relate to Canada’s model of bilingualism and multiculturalism as the foundation of national identity? Federal is defined as “a system of government in which power is divided between a central government and several regional ones . . . of or relating to the central government as distinguished from the separate units” (Barber, *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*). If Canada is a nation of de-centralized federalism (Griffiths’ argument) then there cannot be one national identity. Identity in Canada is regionalized, not centralized.

The concept of citizenship is also related to the concept of federalism. The power to grant citizenship in Canada is given by the federal parliament. The idea of Canadian citizenship is integral to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* since the Charter reserves “certain rights specifically for citizenship (including) . . . minority language rights (Grey, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*). Minority language rights being granted through the federal (or national) *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* runs contradictory to the policy of official or federal bilingualism. Language *rights* suggest several languages, not two languages, not bilingualism; another example of the discrepancies in policy and logic.

To conclude, Canada’s policy of bilingualism as a unifying factor contributing to its citizens’ national identity is paradoxical. And the adoption of laws around multiculturalism and the introduction of a sole official language in Quebec have added to this paradox. The model does not work because it is based on concepts and notions that are contradictory. There is, however, room for new approaches and those are being explored . . . “understanding identity as a process . . . is a more accurate and relevant way of interpreting multiculturalism . . . research also supports the idea of focusing on so-called “bridging” identities to bring people together” (Donaldson 25)

and “nurturing ethno-cultural diversity remains a work in progress subject to the constant evolution of social realities” (Kunz and Sykes 6).

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