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ABSTRACT

The decision of whether to use French or English in Montreal, Canada, is not always predetermined but must be negotiated by the interactants in conversation in ways that can be serious or humorous and have great potential for misunderstanding. The complex relationship between language choice and ethnicity is one factor involved in the decision about which language to use. After a long period of social and geographic isolation of the francophone and anglophone communities, the francophones have become increasingly aware of their lesser economic and social opportunities and have as a community preferred solidarity and replacement of the anglophone community to assimilation into it. Protection of the French language is one aspect of this solidarity. Each language choice situation has its own set of norms, generally unspoken and sometimes governed by circumstance, as in the situation of a patient seeking medical care. Conversants may identify their preference immediately, negotiate the choice of language, or wait until spoken to in their preferred language. In cases in which language choice may be politically determined, one conversant may prefer not to identify a preference. The negotiation process can become a negotiation not only of language choice but also of interpretive frame. Larger-scale events thus have a direct effect on people's communication strategies, but the events are also affected by interpersonal negotiations, an example of how language can come to have social values attached to it.
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"Bonjour, Hello?" :
Negotiations of Language Choice in Montreal

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RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Monica Heller's paper is about the very sensitive issue of language use and language choice in Montreal, Canada. It shows that the decision of whether to speak French or English is often not predetermined, but rather must be negotiated by the interactants in conversation, in ways that can be very serious or very humorous and are full of potential for misunderstanding. The complex relationship between language choice and ethnicity is one of the factors involved in the decision of whether to use French or to use English.

While the situation described here is particular to Montreal, it has relevance for all bilingual situations, such as those that exist in many parts of the United States, but especially in the Southwest. Classroom teachers in bilingual communities and bilingual programs should be aware of the sensitive and subtle nature of language choice.

Joel Sherzer, Co-Editor
Working Papers Series

"BONJOUR, HELLO?" NEGOTIATIONS OF LANGUAGE CHOICE IN MONTREAL

Monica S. Heller

Something strange is going on in Montreal. Every encounter between strangers, especially in public places but by no means exclusively, has become a political act. Buying a pair of socks has become problematic, as witnessed by the following article from The Montreal Star of January 26, 1978:¹

"The other day I walked into a department store and had a conversation which made me feel foolish. It was also frustrating... It's the kind of conversation I have an awful lot of nowadays... The conversation always goes something like this:

I walk up to the counter, intent on buying some socks. "Bonjour," says the woman behind the counter, smiling. "Est-ce que je peux vous aider?" "Oui," I smile back. "Je voudrais acheter des bas comme ça." I point to some socks on display in the showcase. "En beige, s'il vous plaît." "Yes, of course, Madame," she responds in English. "What size?" "er..." I pause, "nine and a half, please."

Our transaction continues smoothly and I thank her and leave the store. But inwardly, the whole time this pleasant bilingual woman is fishing my socks out of the showcase and putting them in a bag and taking the money, I am cursing. Dammit, I want to say. Dammit, lady, why do you always switch to English?...{Does} my French sound so terrible that you'd rather not converse in it with me?...{Do you} recognize an anglophone...and presume I'd prefer to use my own language?...Could it even be that...you're telling me...that you're a federalist?...{This happened once, in such a conversation. I stopped in a garage...and struggled to explain...that my windshield wipers were congelé and I wanted to make them fonctionner. The man listened in

mild amusement and then said: "You don't have to speak French to me, madame. I'm not a separatist.")...

It used to be that language choice was a fairly clear-cut issue, but sociopolitical change over the past eighteen years or so has led to the dissolution of old norms. And as that change has not been resolved, there have yet to be new ones to replace them. In the place of unconscious, or semi-conscious, use of language in everyday life there is an extreme awareness of language, and a new way of holding conversations which involves the negotiation of language choice in every interaction. That awareness of language comes from the symbolic role it has in political life, and from the social value it has acquired as an obvious characteristic of the social groups involved in shifting relationships. The negotiation is a playing out of a negotiation for position in the community at large. It is made up of implicit and explicit strategies for seeking the kind of information that seems necessary in order for the participants to be able to hold a conversation; and that information is information not only about what a person's mother tongue is, but also what his ethnicity is. The fact that conversation often halts, and that negotiations have often to be made in explicit terms, is evidence, I think, of the necessity of shared social knowledge and norms of language use in order for conversation to take place.

I would like first to take a look at the historical background of the situation, and then at some examples of interaction in public places. The data comes from interaction between clerks and patients, and between doctors and patients in the Out-Patient Department of a hospital in downtown Montreal, and from interaction between a waiter and patrons in a restaurant, also in Montreal. I will then try to interpret some of the patterns in those conversations in the light of the aforementioned background.

Originally, Quebec was a French colony. The British acquired it in 1763 as a result of having won the Seven Years' War. The upper classes of New France left and went back to France, leaving behind an agricultural society made up largely of peasants, their seigneurs, and the Catholic Church. The British made little attempt to assimilate them, for reasons which I will not take up here; the result was a French rural labouring class and a British urban Protestant ruling class, engaged, respectively, in agriculture and business. The French, then, maintained their separate identity through physical isolation, the strength of the Church, and sheer numbers: they perpetrated what has come to be called "la revanche du berceau" ("the revenge of the cradle"). At the time of the Industrial Revolution the countryside could no longer support its burgeoning population, and many canadiens moved to urban areas and formed the urban proletariat, a position they have maintained to this day, although more and more they have begun to rise socially and threaten the economic hegemony of the English. This movement began around 1960.

The geographic isolation was maintained in the cities; in Montreal, for example, the east end is French, the west, English, divided down the middle by a buffer zone of immigrant areas dating from at least the turn of the century, and by the downtown financial and commercial area. The geographic isolation is reinforced by a total reduplication of cultural institutions: school commissions are divided into Catholic and Protestant, and within those there are French and English schools (although in fact, of course, the great majority of Catholics are francophone, and the great majority of Protestants are anglophone); there are French and English hospitals, French and English department stores. It was, until recently, rare, in short, for the groups to come into contact. Those who did were usually the francophones who sought

work in English enterprises, and as most business was, and still to a large degree is, English-owned, most québécois had to learn English. It should be noted as well that the position of English was strengthened by two factors: the presence of the English-speaking majority in the rest of Canada (a factor which became salient by the mid-1800s) and the U.S., and the tendency of immigrant groups to assimilate to the English population. This assimilation can be explained by the greater economic opportunities offered to immigrants in the English sector, and by the greater ease of entering the group: French social life tends to be based on the ascribed characteristics of the group members, whereas that of the English is based on achieved ones.

Since about 1960 francophones have become increasingly aware of their unenviable social position, and increasingly able to do something about it. Their strength, however, lies in their solidarity as a group, and it is this very solidarity that, ironically, is being threatened by the very same economic and demographic forces that have enabled them to change their lot, namely, the rise in productivity and hence in standard of living, rise in level of education, the decline in influence of the Catholic Church, and the corresponding tendency to have smaller families. But rather than assimilate to the English population, they would like to replace it. But in order to do that they have to maintain their integrity as a separate group. One of the ways that they are attempting to do this is through political action, most particularly through legislation about language use. Specifically, they are trying to legislate the use of French into existence, where it did not exist before, and to assure its continued use in areas where it seems to be losing ground to English. They are also concerned with the form of the language; that is, it has to be purified from the effects of past onslaught from within, and protected from any future damage other languages may do. Much of this legislation

is directed towards allophone immigrants (that is, immigrants whose mother tongue is neither French nor English), as they are in a position to control the population balance; the French are reeling from the counter-revenge: "la revanche du bateau" ("the revenge of the boat"). It is felt, at any rate, that it is morally more acceptable to make demands of people who have chosen to live in Quebec than of those who were merely born there. As the present provincial government is committed to a policy of nationalism and separatism such legislation is coming thick and fast, and a process which started slowly in the early 60s is quickening its pace to the point where things are changing daily. The population, too, is changing, as many people are leaving and few are coming in. Moreover, as everyone's lives are directly affected, everyone has feelings about the situation, and interpersonal relations are perforce drawn into question. The overwhelming feeling is that you just can't take anything for granted anymore.

It is now time to look at a few examples of interaction to see how these events are manifested in everyday life. The hospital in which I did my field-work (from June to September, 1977) is an English institution, but the majority of the patients in the Out-Patient Department are francophone or allophone. The clerks, however, in order to be hired, must be functionally bilingual in English and French. The question then arises: What language do hospital employees use with each other and with patients? How might we interpret these choices? How do they make them, and what happens when they do? Does the choice ever appear to be problematic? The norms involving how and what to speak to patients appear to be as follows:

1. The hospital is an English one, thus the staff should expect to speak English among themselves, and with the patients.
2. Hospital staff has an obligation to give the best medical care possible,

and this means facilitating communication. Politics should not be involved; communication difficulties should be resolved on a one-to-one basis.

3. The languages of work in Quebec are French and English, and all staff, especially clerical staff, should be bilingual. Doctors are usually exempt from this norm, especially if they are older. (Actually, the language of work is now French, but English still has special status.)
4. The language of the majority of the province is French, and thus all communications should be in French, unless it has been established that the interlocutors are anglophone and choose to talk in English. It is possible for one person to hold norms 1, 2, and 3 at the same time.

It is difficult to tell a priori, however, what norms one's interlocutor holds. Furthermore, it is impossible for a clerk to tell what norms, if any, are held by any patient s/he may speak to; and if this is true, the likelihood is slim that the patients are fully aware of the norms held by the clerks. What prevents anyone, then, from just imposing one's own? At times, of course, this is all one can do, to begin with. But, as I have said, it is not unusual for one person to hold conflicting norms. As well, it is rare that in such a situation people will choose to initiate conflict. A patient who has come seeking medical care is not in a position to impose conditions on how he receives it, unless he is willing to do without. Hospital staff are not in a position to refuse their services, unless they are willing to lose their jobs. How then do they go about the business of talking?

Here is an example in which the only cues interlocutors have about each other are verbal ones: the telephone conversation. Clerks at the Appointments

desk sometimes answer the phone in both French and English ("Central Appointments, Bureau de rendez-vous"), but this is felt to be somewhat abrupt and time-consuming, and is replaced by the more polite, if monolingual, "Central Booking, may I help you?" Thus:

Clerk: Central Booking, may I help you?

Patient: Oui, allô?

Clerk: Bureau de rendez-vous, est-ce que je peux vous aider? (This appears to be a calque from the English formula, as it is a word-for-word translation, and is not used in France; I am indebted to John Gumperz for pointing this out.)

Patient: {French}

Clerk: {French}

Patient: {English}

Clerk: {English}

Patient: {French}

Clerk: {French}

Patient: Êtes-vous française ou anglaise? {ARE YOU FRENCH OR ENGLISH?}

Clerk: N'importe, j'suis ni l'une, ni l'autre... {IT DOESN'T MATTER, I'M NEITHER ONE NOR THE OTHER...}

Patient: Mais... {BUT...}

Clerk: Ça ne fait rien. {IT DOESN'T MATTER}

Patient: {French} {Conversation continues in French}

What we have to explain here are the code-switching and the explicit question about the clerk's ethnic identity, and they-we must ask what role these play in determining what language will be used.

At all points in the conversation both participants theoretically have the option of using French or English, as they show here that they master

both. In the first place, the initial turn need not determine what language will be used. In this case, the obvious conventionalization of the clerk's response may indicate nothing to the patient as to his/her linguistic preference, as the "Englishness" of the institution may determine the telephone-answering behaviour of its staff. Patients often, then, act as though they haven't really heard. By forcing a repetition they may then find out what the clerk really prefers (i.e., does s/he repeat the salutation in English or French?) By saying, "Oui, allo?" the patient is doing something analogous to what she would be doing if she said "Hello?" but she is also introducing another factor into the conversational turn-taking: she is saying, "We can't have this conversation until we decide whether to speak English or French".

Alternatively, the patient may ask "Parlez-vous français?" In this case, the clerk may switch, call a bilingual clerk (theoretical bilingualism not being the same as functional bilingualism), or say "Oui, un peu" (YES, A LITTLE BIT), expecting, in this last case, that the patient will either switch to English or make an effort to speak simple French, slowly and clearly. This last option, however, often leads to frustration and misunderstanding when the clerk's expectations are not fulfilled. The clerk feels that she is doing her best, and they both, or maybe only the patient, may feel that her best is just not good enough. (It might be noted that some doctors feel that having to deal with such communication difficulties is 'dirty work' that is not part of the job they have taken on, although this is probably more true with allophone patients.) Clerks whose French is passable but not perfect tend to feel that speaking French is, on the one hand, part of their duty to be as helpful and as pleasant as possible, and, on the other, a favour which the patient would appreciate. They are more likely to speak French with a

patient who is polite, calm, and presents no problems. If the situation is complicated, if the patient is hostile, senile, or disturbed, or merely insistent about speaking French (which is often interpreted as hostility), or if the clerk is tired and feels the net emotional losses of the interaction are bound to outweigh the net gains, she will try to get someone else to handle it. Thus one clerk once said to me: "Monica, please take {line} 1902. She's French. I understand her, but I'm just too tired." The clerk did, however, want to make it clear to me that she was competent (as she was expected to be). Admitting that you are not perfectly bilingual (for an anglophone) entails loss of face; but speaking French constitutes a favour. However, for a quebecois to accept that 'favour' lets the anglophone keep his position of power in the conversation (indicative of his position of power in the community).

The fact that this conversation then continues in French may be explained if we assume that the clerk feels her French is good enough, that the patient has made an implicit request that the conversation be held in French, and the clerk feels it is incumbent upon her to comply with that request. Why, then, does the patient switch to English? Because the clerk's accent was not typically quebecois (it should be noted that the speaker may be a fluent, even native speaker of French, but if his accent is not typically quebecois, that will engender a switch to English as fast as, if not faster than, an English accent will), or her use of some non-quebecois lexical item (such as 'rendez-vous' instead of 'appointment') led the patient to believe that the clerk may not be quebecoise. And her switch may mean "She speaks English really, and I want to make sure she understands me, so I'd better speak English". It may also, or alternatively mean, "We can't have this conversation until I find out whether you are French or English". The clerk may then feel,

"Doesn't she think my French is good enough?" If the clerk had persisted in speaking French, which also happens, the motivation would probably have been, "Nice of her to try to make it easier for me, but this will be easier and clearer if we do it in French." (The clerk may feel it was genuinely nice, or she may feel it was snide.) The fact that switching keeps occurring probably means that the patient is not getting the information she needs, and so finally has to ask explicitly. She still gets no direct answer. How do we interpret the fact that the conversation continues in French? If we take the question to mean "What language do you speak?" we have to explain it as an attempt to speak the language of the clerk. The hesitation afterwards would come from not wanting to have to make a decision, as would the switching, possibly in an attempt to take back the initial French used, as having been an unconscious slip. If we take the question to mean "What ARE you?" we have to assume that language choice is directly related to ethnicity for this speaker. And we have no way of choosing between the two. The clerk, however, makes a choice as to what the language of the interaction is to be. By doing so she has done two things: 1) she has refused to identify her social group; and 2) she has taken the position of determiner of language away from the patient. The fact that she has done #1 enables her to do #2.

The patient in this last case, unconsciously or not, has identified herself first. Other patients do not. In those cases the clerk is met with silence, and is likely to begin the conversation all over again. Or, if the clerk decides that there is something in the way the patient talks that leads her to believe that he is a speaker of the other language, then the tables are turned, but the problems are the same. But all missed turns or unfelicitous turns are interpreted as linguistic difficulty; the problem lies in figuring out whether or not it is politically motivated. Thus:

Clerk: Lombard, Anne-Marie? {in French}

Patient: Silence. Glare.

Clerk: C'est bien ça votre nom? {THAT'S CORRECT ISN'T IT? THAT'S YOUR NAME?}

Patient: Silence. Glare.

Clerk (pointing to card with name on it): Is this your name?

Patient: Yes.

The conversation continued in English. But the issue can get extremely confused, for example:

Clerk: May I help you?

Patient: Silence.

Clerk: Est-ce que je peux vous aider?

Patient: Confused look.

Clerk: Anglais ou français?

Patient: WHAT?

Clerk: MAY I HELP YOU?

Patient: Oh, yes, yes, I'm sorry, I'm just a little deaf.

Or simply, when one hasn't quite caught what the other person said. A record store employee once asked me something. I didn't hear him and said, "Hmmm?" He repeated himself in French. If I were monolingual the conversation might have been rocky. As it was, it was just ironic that two anglophones who might just as well have been speaking English, held an entire conversation in French. (It used to be, and still to a certain extent is, the case that bilingual francophones will speak English to each other. The fact that the opposite is occurring simultaneously is more evidence of the extreme state of change in social relations and group identification.)

But to return to the explicitly phrased question: there are situations

where the one who calls the language of interaction into question does not necessarily want to be the one who determines the language of interaction. For example, three people were in a downtown delicatessen late one night, speaking English among themselves. Two were fluently bilingual, one had only a working knowledge of French.

Waiter: Je reviens dans une minute. {I'll be back in a minute.}

Pause. Second look.

Waiter: Anglais ou français, English or French?

Two bilinguals: Ben, les deux...{WELL, BOTH...}

Waiter: Non, mais, anglais ou français? {NO, BUT, ENGLISH OR FRENCH?}

Two bilinguals: It doesn't matter, c'est comme vous voulez. {WHATEVER YOU WANT.}

Waiter: (sigh) OK, OK, I'll be back in a minute.

He was trying to do them a favour, and they wouldn't let him. Instead he had to make a choice, and speak French, and identify and assert himself, or speak English and risk offending his customers in case they didn't want to be identified as anglophones (which they probably didn't, or else they might have given him some kind of answer, however indirectly they may have put it.)

The importance of the negotiation is such that when subtler tactics, involving norms of conversational turn-taking, facial gestures, and code-switching, fail to elicit the required information, the question has to be made explicit. Whether it is made in English, French, or both is not necessarily relevant, except that it may be harder to find people with perfect accents in their second language than without. The question has become a conventionalized part of interaction among strangers, and often initiates the interaction. To do so it need not be phrased explicitly: "Bonjour, hello" is a good substitute, unless the other person responds with a smile, in which

case you have to ask "Anglais ou etc."

Patient: Bonjour, English or French, anglais ou français?

Clerk: Czechoslovak (or tchecoslovaque, depending on your point of view).

Patient: Bon, est-ce qu'il y a un endroit ou je peux acheter un journal?

Clerk: ??

Patient: Can I buy a newspaper somewhere?

Clerk: Un journal?

Patient: oui.

Clerk: At the tuck shop, au bout du couloir.

The point about this conversation is that the choice of language did not have to be resolved one way or the other. With experience you learn that it's very hard to tell, when someone asks you if you are English or French, whether or not you are seriously expected to answer the question one way or another. On top of which, the way in which it is raised forces one to take sides, something that not everyone is willing to do. All of this only makes conversational inferences harder to make whereas, one would assume, the explicit question is an attempt to make it easier by bringing it out into the open. Thus the fact that some people promote bilingualism and others oppose it (one PQ member of the National Assembly has said: "They could all be bilingual tomorrow, this wouldn't change the fact that they live and think in English") has led to a curious dance, in which the very same explicit question, and the very same strategies, especially code-switching, might have two or more possible interpretations. Selecting the wrong one can have disastrous effects, viz.: I carried on a conversation at work over the phone with a patient in English. I went to find his Emergency slip, read his name, and went back to the phone.

I: St-Pierre, Robert? {In French}

Patient: St. Pierre. Robert. {In English, and he sounded angry.}

Thus the negotiation of language has to do with judgments of personal treatment, that is, how one expects to be treated in such a situation. But such judgments are dependent upon social knowledge, knowledge about group relations and boundaries and ways of signalling them, and knowledge about other social differences, e.g., status differences. For example, a young anglophone doctor interviewed an illiterate male French-Canadian patient who was about 50 years old, and the patient's female companion in French, although his accent and difficulty with the language were noticeable. When the doctor asked a question that the woman felt was important she would often repeat it to herself in English. Her interaction with the clerks was entirely in French. There are things about situations and their relative importance that determine such language choices, but there are also things that one expects of clerks that one would never expect of doctors.

This negotiation itself serves to redefine the situations in the light of ongoing social and political change. In the absence of norms, we work at creating new ones. The conventionalization of the negotiating strategies appears to be a way of normalizing relationships, of encoding social information necessary to know how to speak to someone (and which language to speak is but one aspect of this). The negotiation is, then, beyond a negotiation of language choice, a negotiation of interpretive frame. The participants work out a frame upon which they can agree, which enables them to converse, i.e., in which their activity has meaning, is interpretable.

Macro-level events have thus had a direct effect on people's communicative strategies. But by the same token those events are affected by how people work out their relationships to each other, for on the basis of how they are

treated in the community, people reformulate their feelings about their role in the community, and hence the political role they choose to play. In this way we can see how it is that language can come to have social values attached to it, and equally how those social values affect language use, and hence the very system itself as its use alters through recourse to aspects of the system. The way in which English and French are spoken in Quebec, and the rate at which they change, will be directly affected by these aspects of their use.

Footnote

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