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# Language, Culture and Identity

## Scientific Cycle 2021–2024

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# Language, Culture & Identity

Language has long confronted thinkers and leaders with many questions about human beings and their relations with each other. Today, contemporary trends like the critical situation of many Indigenous languages worldwide, technological progress in artificial intelligence, and a backlash against globalization bring new urgency or relevance to a number of language-related questions. These include: how to protect and sustain minority languages? What are the implications of artificial intelligence technologies and digital platforms for language learning and use, and for the configuration of languages globally? Are these technologies opening new horizons to understand how language learning affects cognitive predispositions or to empower people with language impairments?

Language(s) will be at the heart of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation's scientific cycle for 2021–2024. Given the interconnectedness of languages with culture and identity, we will pay particular attention to these relationships as we explore issues and debates around language(s) across disciplines. Hence, this scientific theme will challenge Scholars to seek answers to significant questions at the intersection of language, culture and identity. This includes questions such as how progressive modern society may better account for linguistic pluralism and the identity politics embedded within and whether Canada, or a country such as South Africa, has created a linguistic policy landscape that may serve as a model for others as they reconcile their own histories and recognize the importance of linguistic pluralism and its place within increasingly multicultural nations.

Section one of this framework paper provides a brief overview of timely interdisciplinary issues related to language and languages. Sections two and three address contemporary linguistic challenges and their historical background in Canada and South Africa, respectively. Notable for its linguistic diversity, South Africa has had a multilingual state policy for the past 25 years. By providing an international perspective and a point of comparison, the South African case will help broaden our Scholars' reflection on language, culture and identity.

## 1 Multiple questions around language(s)

As a foundational aspect of human behaviour, language sits at the intersection of our biological and cultural inheritance; it is the product of brain activity and is acquired naturally, but is much influenced by the past and contemporary cultural context. Further, language refers both to the human capacity for speech and meaning-making, and to a specific linguistic system such as the English or French language. Given the complex nature of language, it is associated with a broad range of questions that lend themselves to scientific inquiry in a plurality of disciplines, including through an interdisciplinary approach.

In the humanities and social sciences, the rich variety of questions that have been and continue to be explored include the role of language in society; how linguistic changes occur; how people's language shapes their culture and identity and how, in turn, the latter shape languages. For anthropologists and other social scientists, language is much more than a tool for communication in society; language functions as a relational, symbolic, material and ideological space. As such, it is a key part of culture and serves social functions such as the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, the construction of knowledge about the world, as well as the definition and expression of people's identities.

With respect to language as a cognitive faculty, disciplines like cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology have produced important new knowledge in the last 20 years, thanks to the development of new techniques of brain mapping[1]. Notably, it was shown that speakers of different languages develop different cognitive skills and predispositions and that bilingualism (whatever languages spoken) has positive effects on cognitive development and long-term cognitive health[2]. Increasingly, the advancement of knowledge on the cognitive aspects of language may help empower people living with language disorders or impairments. For instance, in April 2019, the media announced the creation of a new device that translates brain activity into speech, which is a promising avenue that could one day give a voice to people who lost speech from neurological disorders[3].

Language is also a core topic in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). Developments in this field have so far allowed the development of technologies of human-robot interaction and automatic language processing, including through applications for language learning, translation and interpretation. With respect to translation, recent years have seen great improvements in the accuracy of AI-enabled translation platforms like Google Translate and Microsoft Translator, although their performance varies across languages. This raises the question as to whether machine translation will soon remove the need for human translation and what may be the implications (linguistically, socially, culturally and economically) of the increasing reliance of organizations and individuals on automatic translation. More broadly, language-related technological progress raises the following questions:

> How do digital technologies impact human linguistic abilities and practices, and how will AI systems affect language learning and use?

> Will access to AI assist minority groups in reclaiming linguistic and other semiotic resources?

> Do artificial intelligence technologies provide new opportunities for multilingualism? Could they undercut the necessity for a lingua franca in multilingual contexts and could that negatively impact intercultural understanding and people's openness to different cultures and identities?

> How may language technologies impact the dissemination of knowledge?

### Preserving and navigating linguistic diversity

While there are about 7,000 languages in the world, more than half the world's population speaks just 23 of them and it is predicted that nearly half of languages will disappear by the next century, most of them being Indigenous languages[4]. What are the consequences for humanity of losing languages? From an anthropological perspective, a group's language embeds cultural specificities such as specific knowledge, modes of thinking and world views. These cultural specificities, which shape people's identities, are not necessarily easily transferable in another language. Hence, losing a language means losing a specific cultural legacy. That can imply the loss of precious knowledge for human improvement and sustainable development; for instance, Indigenous languages often encode specific ecological knowledge that reflects a unique understanding of the local environment.[5]

With the Internet having become central to the functioning of contemporary knowledge societies, linguistic diversity in the digital world has also become a cause for concern. According to Internet World Stats, ten languages (including English and Mandarin Chinese, but also French) make up for more than 75% of languages used on the Internet[6]. What are the implications of this narrowing of the linguistic field? How does language affect one's experience of the Internet? It seems safe to assume that the linguistic digital divide creates inequalities of access to information and knowledge for speakers of non-dominant languages. Could the Internet not be a place to grow and promote greater understanding and recognition for minority languages? So how can we foster linguistic diversity and multilingualism on the Internet?

The importance of being able to access information in one's language is brought to light in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Ethnologue, an authoritative resource on world languages, as of April 2020, "Millions of people who speak lesser-known languages don't have a single resource on COVID-19 yet. The information gap is enormous – and lives are at stake"[7]. This exemplifies how crucial people's ability to use their language can be and how it is a matter of human rights and dignity. As recognized by the United Nations, a person's freedom to use his or her chosen language is a prerequisite to other human rights such as access to health

services, education and information as well as access to employment and freedom of expression[8].

In a different vein, while English has been the international lingua franca since at least the mid-20th century, contemporary international trends, in terms of the distribution of demographic, political and economic power, suggest that Mandarin Chinese might become the new lingua franca in the future, assuming technological progress does not put an end to the global dominance of one language. In terms of native speakers, Mandarin Chinese is by far the most spoken language in the world due to the very large population of China[9]. Be that as it may, how does the realignment of power globally, which is leading to the re-emergence of powers such as China and changes in multilateral governance, affect the status and role of languages (particularly English)? Contemporary political trends at the international level also raise questions such as: how is the backlash against globalization and the rise of populism affecting the politics and policies of language?

At the level of individual countries, the management of linguistic diversity and minority languages remains an important and complex issue in many states. On that topic, the following sections provide a window into linguistic issues and debates in Canada and South Africa.

## 2 Linguistic diversity in Canada: From bilingualism to multilingualism?

Language and linguistic diversity have been central to the evolution of Canada throughout its history. They continue to raise important challenges in the 21st century, notably with respect to the fate of francophone minorities across Canada, the efforts to maintain and revitalize Indigenous languages and the increasing linguistic diversity stemming from international migration.

### Historical and institutional background

Before the European colonization of what is now the Canadian territory, Indigenous peoples spoke a great diversity of languages, including those from the Algonquian, Iroquoian, Siouan and Athabaskan language families[10]. Following French and British colonization in the 17th and 18th centuries, French and English took centre stage in the institutional life and political debates of the Canadian territory, Indigenous languages being ignored, at best, and from the 1870s, explicitly targeted by assimilationist policies of the federal government[11].

French-English linguistic duality and bilingualism played an important role in the negotiations of the Canadian Confederation in the 1860s, contributing to the decision to create a federal entity, in response to French Canadians' concern over the protection of their language and culture[12]. In the decades following Confederation, it will turn out, however, that federalism did not guarantee the protection of the rights of francophone minorities, as some provinces with an

English majority banned French from their schools and legislative assemblies[13]. Moreover, in Quebec, until the 1960s, French and English had an equal status in public institutions, but English dominated the economic spheres and the francophone majority was in a situation of socio-economic inferiority relative to anglophones[14].

Political developments in the 1960s were pivotal to the subsequent evolution regarding linguistic issues in Canada and social representations about Canadian identity. In the context of increasing Quebec nationalism and tensions between Quebec and Ottawa, the federal government launched, in 1963, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism[15]. It was based upon the Commission's findings that Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau introduced, in 1969, the *Official Languages Act* (OLA), which made English and French the official languages of Canada and established French-English bilingualism in federal institutions[16]. In response to the concerns of other cultural minority groups, the government complemented the OLA with a multiculturalism policy recognizing the intrinsic value of cultural diversity in Canadian society and promoting cultural retention[17]. Multiculturalism was, however, firmly embedded within the bilingual framework of the OLA and, as such, it encouraged cultural groups other than francophones and anglophones to learn one or both official languages[18]. With the OLA and the multiculturalism policy, official bilingualism and multiculturalism (or pluralism) were being defined as key values of the country[19].

The Constitution Act of 1982 upgraded the status of French-English bilingualism to the rank of fundamental right by incorporating a set of linguistic provisions in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, notably the right of every individual Canadian to use French or English in their communications with federal government institutions, and official language educational rights for provincial minorities[20]. Taking into account developments stemming from the Charter, the OLA was strengthened in 1988.

Within the limits permitted by the Charter, federalism has allowed Canadian provinces and territories to adopt different linguistic policies, language being a shared competence of the federal and provincial governments[21]. Hence, official bilingualism at the federal level coexists with different provincial and territorial linguistic regimes. Since 1969, New Brunswick has been the only officially bilingual province, with significant challenges in the balance of power between francophone and anglophone communities. Since 1974, Quebec has been the only province with French as the only official language, a decision that prompted a history of challenges and identity crises balancing the province's language laws and its long-standing English-speaking communities. The eight other provinces have English as their official language (de jure or de facto), while two of the three territories (Northwest Territories and Nunavut) added Indigenous languages to French and English as their official languages[22]. Moreover, since the 1980s, all provinces and territories, except British Columbia, have adopted laws, regulations or policies on the rights of official language minorities, although this

has not meant equal rights of French and English speakers across the country[23].

### French and francophone minorities

Many francophones have long considered the general situation of the French language in Canada as precarious and data from the most recent census (2016) offer some support for this view: "Data on knowledge of official languages, languages spoken at home and first official language spoken indicate a decline in the relative weight of French in Canadian society. Conversely, English is seeing a bit of an upswing, particularly in Quebec"[24]. Overall, French is the first official language spoken by 22.8% of the Canadian population (7.9 million), but only about 1 million live in other provinces than Quebec, with Ontario having the most francophones, followed by New Brunswick and Alberta[25].

In terms of access to services in French in each province, francophones outside Quebec have found key support within the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Indeed, through Charter-based judicial review, francophone minority communities were able to obtain, to some extent, recognition of their linguistic rights, including "the provinces' obligation to fund educational facilities in the language of the minority", which was a significant gain for these communities[26]. However, the constitutional language regime is not sufficient to ensure the vitality of francophone communities outside Quebec. While members of these minorities continue to contest their unmet demands for provincial public services in French in the courts, recent Supreme Court judgments (e.g. Caron judgment, 2015) have been less favourable to the protection of the interests of francophone minorities[27]. Moreover, in some provinces, recent years have seen difficult conditions for francophones; in particular, the governments of Ontario and New Brunswick refused to pursue some of their investments in services and institutions for francophones[28].

With respect to bilingualism in federal institutions, annual reports by the Official Languages Commissioner of Canada clearly indicate that shortcomings persist in the implementation of the OLA, to the detriment of francophones' rights[29]. As a result, various stakeholders (including the Official Languages Commissioner and the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages) have called for the modernization of this legislation in order to strengthen it[30]. This raises a broader question: what should be done to improve the implementation of institutional bilingualism and ensure the respect of francophones' linguistic rights across Canada? In the future, could new technologies be harnessed to support the learning and use of French in these institutions? And crucially, how to ensure the future vitality of francophone minority communities across Canada?

### Beyond the official languages

Over the past 15 years, there has been increasing recognition that, as stated in the 2005 report of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures: "Canada's linguistic heritage runs deeper than the English and French languages"[31]. There are about 70 Indigenous languages

in Canada, most of which are "endangered" according to UNESCO and the government of Canada[32]; accordingly, "in 2016, only 15.6% of Indigenous people could converse in an Indigenous language, compared to 17% of Indigenous people in 2011 and 21% in 2006"[33]. The precarious situation of Indigenous languages stems largely from the history of assimilationist governmental policies that prohibited First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples—in the context of residential schools—from speaking their native language[34]. This has hindered the cultural transmission of these languages from generation to generation and has contributed to disconnecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples from their culture and identity[35].

Following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2005–2015), the federal government worked to develop legislation that would help reverse the erosion of First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages[36]. This resulted in the adoption, in June 2019, of the *Indigenous Languages Act*, which contains provisions to "support the efforts of Indigenous Peoples to reclaim, revitalize, strengthen and maintain Indigenous languages"[37]. The reactions of First Nations, Inuit and Metis organizations to the bill have raised a number of questions for debate[38], including these: does the legislation offer adequate and sufficient support for Indigenous languages and their long-term vitality? Beyond federal legislation, what are other actors—provinces, territories and non-governmental actors—doing to help ensure a future for Indigenous languages in Canada and what other measures could be implemented? In what ways may the private and non-profit sectors collaborate to support the revitalization of Indigenous languages?

In addition to English, French and Indigenous languages, linguistic diversity in Canada is also reflected in the presence of many other languages due to international migration, which is currently the main source of population growth in the country and is expected to be so in the next 25 years[39]. While 50 years ago, about 15% of the population of the country was born abroad, this proportion was at 22% in 2016. Knowledge of English or French is one of the selection criteria for economic immigrants in Canada—and Quebec, specifically, privileges immigrants who are French speakers—but increasing immigration in the country nonetheless implies an increasing linguistic diversity in terms of people's mother tongue(s) and language(s) spoken at home[40]. From 2011 to 2016, the number of people who reported an immigrant mother tongue increased by 910,400 people or 13.3%, bringing the total number of Canadians speaking a mother tongue other than French or English to 7.7 million[41]. The most common mother tongues among immigrants (more than 100,000 people) include Mandarin, Cantonese, Punjabi, Spanish and Arabic[42].

Considering that international immigration in the country is expected to remain important in the foreseeable future, what may be the implications of this trend for the status and use of languages in Canada? Thinking of the linguistic future of the country prompts a set of related questions:

> What impact may greater linguistic diversity have on French-English bilingualism, both at the institutional and individual levels?

> Will multilingualism become a more important value for Canadians, notably on the job market?

> Could artificial intelligence technologies support greater multilingualism across the country?

> Are there lessons Canada could be learning from other multilingual countries in terms of languages learning and management? What would it take for Canada to be a world leader of multilingualism?

## 3 Linguistic pluralism and multilingualism in South Africa

When compared to Canada, South Africa's linguistic landscape appears even more diversified and multilingual, both officially and sociologically. While Afrikaans and English were the only official languages during the apartheid regime (1948–1991), the post-apartheid Constitution extended the official language status to nine Indigenous languages (often referred to as "African languages" in a technical linguistic sense), namely: Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Tswana, Sotho, Tsonga, Swati, Venda and Ndebele. Languages that are most spoken at home among South Africans are Zulu (25%), Xhosa (15%) and Afrikaans (12%)[43]. Zulu is also the most commonly spoken language outside the household (25%), followed by English (17%) and Xhosa (13%)[44]. That being said, individual multilingualism is very common in South Africa, many individuals being able to speak more than two of the official languages and the mixing of different languages being a common practice, especially in urban areas[45].

To understand contemporary linguistic issues (and the intersection of language, culture and identity) in South Africa, it is essential to go back to the history of the country. The current South African territory was first occupied by the Khoisan peoples, whose traditional society and language were eventually destroyed with the establishment of Dutch settlers in the 17th century[46]. Over time, the demographic and cultural makeup of the territory diversified as a result of settlers' importation of slaves from Mozambique, Madagascar, the East Indies and India, the eastward expansion of the colony and the latter's conquest by the British[47]. Prior to the British influence, the Afrikaans language had developed in the Cape as a local variety of Dutch, alongside Indigenous languages[48]. In the 19th and 20th centuries, until 1947, British colonizers pursued an Anglicizing policy, which led to Afrikaners feeling linguistically and culturally threatened, and was a contributing factor to the growth of Afrikaner nationalism[49].

In 1948, the arrival to power of an Afrikaner nationalist elite led to the enforcement of an Afrikaans-English bilingualism across the country, even though Afrikaans and English speakers were minorities within the population[50]. The new regime actively promoted the use of the Afrikaans language and put in place mechanisms for separating Afrikaners from the other South African linguistic and cultural groups[51]. One of these apartheid mechanisms was the "Bantu

Education", a segregationist education policy under which black people (the majority of the population) were educated in their mother-tongue language, but were indoctrinated with a racist curriculum aimed at convincing them of their social inferiority[52]. From 1948 to 1994, the policies pursued by the apartheid regime resulted in the enhancement of the status of Afrikaans in South Africa, increasing its use and making it the lingua franca of the country[53]. At the same time, "Afrikaans became associated with the apartheid regime and was subsequently stigmatized as the 'language of the oppressor'"[54].

With Afrikaans being associated with the oppression of the apartheid regime and Indigenous languages having been denigrated for a long time, English became widely used within the anti-apartheid political movement and it dominated the negotiations that led to the first democratic elections of 1994. However, during the constitutional drafting process that followed, politicians opted for institutionalizing linguistic pluralism. Seeking to counter the previous privileging of Afrikaans while also avoiding downgrading its official status, lawmakers elevated the country's nine major Indigenous languages to the status of official languages, along with English[55]. Thus, since the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, South Africa has had eleven official languages.

Many language policy specialists consider the pluralist linguistic provisions of the South African Constitution as exemplary and "commendably enlightened", in addition to representing, "the most multilingual state policy in the world"[56]. Committing the government to treat all eleven languages equitably, the Constitution also explicitly recognizes "the historically diminished use and status of the Indigenous languages of our people" and states that, as a consequence, "the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages"[57]. Further, as part of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution "protects the rights of individuals to use the language of their choice" and "to receive education in the official languages or language of their choice where that is practicable"[58]. Overall, the South African constitutional framework promotes "linguistic pluralism as a resource for the promotion of a common, non-racial, fully inclusive South African identity"[59].

### Contemporary issues around languages in South Africa

About 25 years into the post-apartheid constitutional order, experts' assessments of the linguistic situation in South Africa suggest that there have been, and there are still today, significant discrepancies between the official policy and the on-the-ground reality and practices of government actors and South Africans in general[60]. According to Orman, "public life in present-day South Africa is notable for its increasingly monolingual-English character", which is "symptomatic of the hegemony of an implicit 'English-only' ideology that permeates most governmental and public organizations"[61]. While English is far from dominant in terms of languages spoken at home by South Africans, it is dominant in fields such as business, trade and higher

education, and by and large, it is perceived as the language of social mobility[62].

As mentioned by Beukes, "the role of Indigenous languages in education has been the object of considerable public debate and scholarly scrutiny"[63]. Beukes and Ricento note that the use of English has been increasing and that an increasing number of primary schools have adopted English as a medium of instruction[64]. The use of Indigenous languages as languages of learning and teaching tends to be restricted to underprivileged schools, while privileged schools use English as a medium of instruction[65]. The source of this pattern is notably related to the historical experience of the segregationist Bantu education policy, which developed the widespread cognitive association of Indigenous languages with an inferior quality of education, in addition to the belief that these languages "have little instrumental value"[66]. These negative attitudes toward Indigenous languages are shared by those who, themselves, speak these languages as a mother tongue. The result is that many South African children do not receive education in their mother tongue, a reality that is decried by advocates of language equality in the country[67]. Overall, socio-economic inequalities are closely related with linguistic inequalities: "those who have the highest levels of education tend to be most proficient in Afrikaans and/or English", while those who are the least educated and have the least economic power are speakers of Indigenous languages, who constitute the vast majority of South Africans[68].

Afrikaans speakers, for their part, have seen a decline in the status and use of their language (and in their political power) in the public life of the post-apartheid period; Afrikaans was abandoned as a language of state administration and its use in business, industry and advertising, among other fields, declined. According to Orman, this situation has generated a "language-based identity conflict" between Afrikaans speakers and those, including "Westernized black South Africans", buying into the de facto dominant use of English[69].

A further problem raised in the literature has to do with the linguistic categorizations that were institutionalized in the post-apartheid period, based on "the same ethnolinguistic identities that were so dubiously and controversially ascribed to the black population by the apartheid government"[70]. According to Makoni, "The African languages listed in the South African Constitution ... reinforce the boundaries which were arbitrarily drawn by [European] missionaries and subsequently awarded academic credibility through grammatical descriptions"[71]. In so doing, the two authors argue that the South African Constitution has perpetuated the European settlers' construct of languages as "neatly divided, bounded units", in contrast with the way local communities "experienced" language[72]. Thus, for Makoni and Pennycook, genuine decolonization and the empowerment of Indigenous speakers require a "disinvention" and "reconstitution" of the South African Indigenous languages[73].

In sum, this short overview of the rich linguistic landscape of South Africa raises a set of questions for further reflection and debate, including the following:

> What are the benefits and limits of giving equal recognition to several languages in a jurisdiction? How to balance social inclusion and pragmatic concerns of efficiency in this regard?

> What solutions may be adopted to advance the use and appreciation of historically marginalized languages in South Africa?

> Could new digital technologies help South Africa ensure greater linguistic equality among its citizens?

> What could Canada and South Africa learn from each other's experience with languages? For instance, could Canadians take inspiration from the more common practice of individual multilingualism in South Africa?

> How does individual multilingualism, which appears more common in South Africa than in Canada, impact the way people think and relate to others?

## Conclusion

The interdisciplinary study of language(s) allows us to grasp how it constructs our political and legal reality, while intersecting with social identity, group membership and intergenerational transmission of cultural beliefs. Further, as this framework paper illustrates, considering language through an interdisciplinary lens opens the door to many topical questions, including the impact of digital technologies on linguistic abilities, dispositions and practices, the challenges of protecting minority languages, as well as preserving and fostering linguistic diversity in political communities and on the Internet. Leaders in Canada and the world need to ponder such questions to ensure social inclusion, respect for cultural diversity and human rights, and to be innovative and forward-looking in the face of current linguistic issues.

It is within this landscape that the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation's 2021-2024 *Language, Culture & Identity* scientific cycle for its leadership program will invite Scholars to reflect on, and debate, societal issues with respect to language(s), taking into consideration, notably, the interconnectedness of the latter with culture and identity across disciplines, digital platforms, and geographic boundaries.

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