

A NEW LOOK AT FRENCH IN THE ST. JOHN VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

In the early part of the twentieth century, the inhabitants of the St. John Valley were mostly of French descent and spoke French almost exclusively. Today, it appears that we have gone almost full circle and have become a society where our children speak almost exclusively in English. It seems to some that we have, for all practical purposes, become, once again, an almost monolingual society, speaking English almost exclusively. If this is the case, what have we lost? What are the implications for the future, especially in education?

PROBLEM AND RATIONALE :

This paper will deal with the status of the French culture and language in the St. John Valley at the present time and its implications for the future. The first part will encompass the history of the language to this day, extracting only those factors which have influenced the teaching and promulgation of the culture and the language. The second part will look at the status of the French culture and language at the present time and examine those practices which are in existence today in our schools, and the last part will look at the prognosis for the future of the teaching of French in the valley.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS

In order to look at the factors which influenced the eventual decline of the French culture in our region, one must look beyond the obvious, i.e., punishments, denigration, etc., of which I will speak later, and look at those factors which predisposed the inhabitants of French ancestry to be “taken over” by other cultures.

For years it had seemed strange to me that, in an area that was almost entirely populated by members of one group, this group could be dominated to the point of allowing itself to become subject to another.

One could cite several factors which have contributed to this phenomena. However, Eve Gagne (1987) seems to have come upon that one factor which so permeated the very fiber of the French Canadian that it overwhelmed all other considerations, and that is his Catholicism. “It is impossible,” she says, “to understand the French Canadian culture and spirit without understanding Catholicism.” (p. 47). She stresses the Catholic need for a priest for the sacraments and for guidance, as well as for a paternal figure. She speaks of their clustering in small towns, where they built a church and maintained a priest. She explains that life centered around that church and shows the profound effect this dependence had upon their lives. “Authority,” Gagne continues, was perceived as necessary to the scheme of things ; it was accepted and even welcomed. Thus evolved the French Canadian lamb... (p. 47).

Although Gagne was referring mostly to the Franco-American of the Midwest, descendant from the French Canadian, she has touched upon the very factor which, in my opinion, has made the Franco-American of New England, and notably that of the St. John Valley, of like descendance, so amenable to being taken over by a culture not his own.

Since the landing of the first French settlers here in the late eighteenth century, the inhabitants had lived peacefully in farming communities which eventually became a series of small towns each centering mainly around the Catholic church and parish.

The first major contacts with Anglos occurred as business contacts in the lumber industry in the mid-nineteenth century. Lumber companies, owned and operated by English merchants, began employing French workers to cut trees and drive logs down the St. John River from Allagash to St. John. Those Anglos coming into the St. John Valley had wealth, expertise in legal matters, jobs, etc. They traded at local stores, which were often built next to the church and rectory so people could trade goods when they came to church and were supervised by the parish priest himself. It was, therefore, easy for the Franco to accept these men as powerful and worthy of their respect. (Dubay 1993).

The establishment, in the 1920's, of the Fraser paper mill in Madawaska had a major impact on the status of the Franco-American in the entire St. John Valley. Where the lumber-cutting industry had attracted the friendly, industrious worker, the mill brought with it a competition which had not been fostered in the French Catholic character. The Church, with its insistence on the virtues of worldly poverty, humility, and obedience, had all but neutralized the idea of competition in their lives. By spending freely and being generous to a fault, the Catholic would remain poor and, therefore, pleasing to God. Humility kept him from aspiring to positions of power, and obedience made him a willing worker, taking orders readily. (Gagne 1987, p. 48) And so, the French willingly accepted the jobs at the lower levels of the mill, the arduous jobs, the dangerous, industrial jobs wherever they worked.

As the years went by and the Franco became more and more Americanized, he began to aspire to executive-level positions. This did not come easily. Even people who had worked in the lower echelons of the industry for years and had become very knowledgeable about the workings of the mill did not seem to be considered as "manager material." The "silent language" (Hall, 1981) of his entire existence thus far had labelled the Franco-American as a man "good with his hands" and easily led. To the outsider he appeared "careless and easygoing." (Gagne 1987, p. 46) Besides, the mill was a Canadian enterprise and gave preferential treatment to Canadians for executive positions, all of which seemed to be filled with candidates from Anglo backgrounds. (Dubay 1993). The Franco-American of the valley was now caught in an English speaking world on both sides of the border. What was he to do?

In other outlying areas of Franco-American culture, heads of households had anglicized their names to enhance their chances for good jobs. In Caribou, some forty miles away, the Roy family had become the King family, the LeBlancs were now the Whites, apparently with some results. The idea that somehow English names were linked to power and French names were synonymous with lower status had taken hold. The impression was that, in all of Northern Aroostook County down to Presque Isle, Francos dared not aspire to any but the most menial of jobs.

True, the Franco-American was experiencing this lowered status in the job market, but it was through the educational systems that perhaps one of the most significant of the destructive influences on his self-esteem was suffered. Until the late 1930's, schooling had been conducted in French, with English taught as a subject. French language and mores had waxed strong in the area until this time. However, in the 1940's, with the coming of the first Anglo superintendents of schools, children in the schools began to be subjected to intimidation and denigration because of their background.

The superintendents began to press for English to be spoken in the schools. At first it was, "Please encourage the children to speak English." But later, in the 1950's under other Anglo superintendents, it became mandatory for students to speak English only. Signs reading "English must be spoken" were posted in hallways and classrooms by the Franco-American Elementary Supervisor. If the children spoke French among themselves or if the teacher spoke French to the children, the teacher was reprimanded. Teachers, in fear for their jobs, began enforcing the "English only" rule by punishing the children who spoke French. (Collin & Plourde, 1993).

Basic punishments were widespread and took various forms, from the child being kept after school or in at recess, to being given extra homework or lines to copy. At the convent school I attended, a system of cardboard tokens was established in which students were made to take a token from any classmate who spoke French. At the end of the week, those having too few tokens were punished, and those having the most tokens were rewarded. According to J. Paradis (Feb. 1993), this system was still in place in some elementary schools of the area in the late 1960's.

The rationale was “We are Americans and, therefore, we must speak English.” (Plourde 1993). Even kindergarten children coming from homes where only French was spoken had to somehow survive in classrooms taught strictly in English by their very own people. Speaking French became a clandestine activity. The sense of betrayal by one’s very own sparked anger and bitterness.

From the 1930’s, the children of mill executives and of school officials had come to reside in local towns. Some had been easily assimilated into the French culture while others had remained on the fringes of the general population. According to some former teachers (Collin & Pozzuto, Feb. 1993), this was probably due largely to the difference in religion and perhaps in small part to the fact that a few teachers showed favoritism to the Anglo children in an effort to curry favor with the people of power in the town. It seemed, too, that the town children were considered superior to the “bus kids,” those coming from the outlying areas, mostly the farms. (Dubay & Possuto, 1993)

Another factor in the denigration of the Franco-American is one which I have heard mentioned by only one source, Guy Dubay (Feb. 1993), but one which I had personally experienced and which I believe to be a very strong factor in the demoralization of the Franco-American in the St. John Valley. That is the attitude of the French speaking nuns from Canada and from France that the language spoken here was a corruption of the French language and was, therefore, a “bad French.” These nuns, in concert with those English-speaking nuns from New York and elsewhere, further strengthened local insecurities with the assertion that people of the Valley were so unschooled that they spoke “neither French nor English.”

Even in the training of teachers at the Madawaska Training School, now the University of Maine in Fort Kent, some students were failed because of their accents in 1939 (Pozzuto 1993) and had to later really prove themselves in order to become teachers in the area.

By 1960, being French-speaking in this area had become such a liability that local French was all but abandoned by some people. A couple from Frenchville, both of French parents, both teachers, refused to teach their children to speak French because, they said, it would hinder their

fluency in English. The grandparents did not speak English at all and so, during their visits, the children stayed outside and played with neighbors' children while the parents were inside visiting. These children were totally robbed of communication with their grandparents, much to the chagrin of these grandparents. Ironically, both children tried desperately in the 1980's to learn French to enhance their chances of advancement in careers in hotel management, but with only limited success. They had lost a great resource and a great opportunity.

What about the rest of the inhabitants here? Has the entire Franco-American population in the Valley also lost a great resource and a great opportunity? Although the teaching of French resumed in our school system with the coming of Pace/Fabric in 1967, when great efforts were initiated to neutralize the effects of years of denegration and humiliation of the Franco-American population in the area, the monumental task of reinducting a love for a language which has caused so many people so much suffering has been all but impossible to accomplish.

The near-destruction of his self-esteem, took a tremendous toll on the Franco-American. Here were Krashen's inhibitors, the "affective filter" through which input could not become intake. (Richard-Amato, 1988, p. 25). Here were children, and adults, stripped of pride in their culture and language, which Cummins states is "a necessity if the students are to have positive attitudes not only toward themselves but toward the target language and the people who speak it." (Richard-Amato, p. 224).

It is in the schools, Cummins also claims, that you can validate or destroy the child's self-esteem. "Minority students," he says, "are 'empowered' or 'disabled' as a direct result of their interactions with educators in the schools." (Cummins, 1989, p. 58). He quotes several studies conducted in Japanese, Swedish, and American schools which showed that minority students who immigrate later (about ten years old) seem to do better academically than those born in the host country and attributes these findings to the "fact that these students have not experienced devaluation of their identity in the social institutions (e.g. schools) of the host country...." (p. 58).

The Franco-American was born here, and he has truly been devalued in his own land. If it was in the schools that he suffered his greatest defeats, then it is proper that it be in the schools that the efforts to remedy the situation begin. Let us look at the situation as it stands today.

PRESENT DAY STATUS

Perhaps the twenty-fifth anniversary of the coming of Pace/Fabric to the St. John Valley is an appropriate time to look at the effects of this attempt to halt the destruction of the French culture and language in this area. This program was one of the many factors which united to help the Franco-American of the St. John Valley regain some self-esteem and become, once again, a person in his own right. Without a doubt, one of the indications of this new status was the election, in 1982, of the first Franco-American, born and raised in Frenchville, as manager of Fraser Paper, Inc. This marked a definite departure from the “social structure of our societies” which was “such that the vast majority of students whose parents have menial and low-paying jobs leave school educated only to the level where they can occupy the same social niche.” (Cummins, 1989, p. 6).

Other examples can be cited of people from the St. John Valley rising to power in the last twenty years, perhaps the most notable of these being John Martin, from Eagle Lake, becoming Speaker of the House in Augusta.

True, the Franco-American has finally established a foothold in American society. And, if we were to examine the rise of these individuals, we would probably find that it was through education and through force of character that these people rose to the positions that they achieved. The first Franco-American mill manager was the son of a Valley teacher and had six years of college at Orono, and John Martin was, and still is, a teacher. Senator Judy Paradis, also, taught in Valley schools for many years.

The Franco-American, however, he has had to continue to battle in order to maintain this foothold against those forces that have remained in place over the years. If undoing the damage that was done during that time is the answer, then where do we stand now?

Let us look at the status of the French language and of French instruction in the valley schools today. Based on interviews with teachers of French from Van Buren to Wallagrass, I have assembled the following information about current practices in our schools.

In Van Buren, French instruction takes place during two 15-minute periods each week in kindergarten and two half-hour periods each week grades one through six. About half of the children in these classes understand French fairly well but few actually speak it.

In Grand Isle, under the same teacher, French instruction takes place with the same schedule with a little over half understanding French well and a few speaking it. Roy (1993) believes that this better disposition towards French can be attributed to the fact that Grand Isle is more isolated from the bigger towns and that these people take more pride in their French roots.

In Madawaska, French is taught one half-hour to one hour per week from kindergarten to grade five. In grade six, it is taught two or three times a week for one quarter and, in grade eight, one period each day for the whole year. In high school, the college preparatory course requires two years of a foreign language and the great majority elect French over Spanish. A third year of French is offered but there are usually no takers. Clavette (1993) attributes this lack of interest to the negative attitude fostered by past experiences of punishment and denigration suffered by the parents. This attitude has persisted even in the face of a strong French influence from nearby Edmundston, N.B., where there has been a history of intermarriage between the two communities. Clavette estimates that about forty to forty-five percent of the families speak French, but he sees homes where, even though the mother speaks only French, the children answer in English. The punitive attitude toward French, he feels, is still very much in evidence.

In MSAD #27, which encompasses the Fort Kent area, no French is taught from kindergarten to grade six. For grades seven and eight, the teacher travels to classes as far as St. Francis and Eagle Lake for two 42-minute class periods each week. French teacher Ann Levesque feels that, at this point, only about ten to fifteen percent of students comprehend and speak French although approximately forty to fifty percent of their parents do so.

At the high school level in the same district, the French teacher felt that, with each progressive year, the students understood and spoke less and less. Only one class of advanced French II showed promise, with approximately half understanding oral French and a third being able to speak. Other classes of French I and II averaged about twenty-five percent with oral comprehension and about ten to fifteen percent being able to speak French at all. Soucy attributes

this to the attitude of parents who had suffered punishments in childhood for speaking French. She believes that, by the year 2000, the children in the area will be totally assimilated into the American culture and will speak nothing but English.

This brings us to our own school district, MSAD #33. At Dr. Levesque Elementary School, French and English are used as needed in kindergarten. In grades one through three, French is taught three times a week for 30-minute periods and, in grades four through six, four times a week for 45-minute periods. All but two of the fifteen teachers are bilingual and use French as needed during the day even if it is not French class.

From grades one through three, almost all children will willingly repeat phrases, learn songs, etc. ; almost all understand conversations and about half will repeat short phrases. However, by fourth grade, it becomes more difficult to make them speak French, probably because, as Bouchard (1993) puts it, “ they become self-conscious or peer-pressure sets in and they don’t want to try.” Bouchard feels that there is community support for the teaching of French.

At Wisdom Middle/High School, French is taught every other day at the seventh and eighth grade levels. The college preparatory course in high school requires two years of French and this is taught on a five-day per week schedule. Occasionally, there is a demand for French III and IV, which were offered for many years on an individualized basis. However, this has not been possible in the last two years because of scheduling problems.

At the high school level, about sixty percent understand a basic oral French and can respond accordingly. Writing skills are lower than oral skills, however, with about thirty percent being able to produce an adequate composition with a bit of help. French seems to have regained some status in our school district, although we do have a number of students who understand French quite well but who loudly complain about how badly they speak it and how useless it is for them to learn French at all. I believe these are students whose parents have suffered the most to maintain whatever French is still spoken in the home but who do not want their children to suffer as they did.

Another phenomena has arisen in our district which, I am sure, exists in other districts, and that is the problem expressed by the children of Anglos who have moved into our school system. Although some of these children were actually born in the area and have gone through the same school system as the local children, they feel that, since their parents do not speak French, they are at a disadvantage and cannot learn French at all. By the time they reach middle school level, they have built such a block against learning French that it is almost impossible to get them to even try. It becomes a problem of acculturation for these children in a manner which closely resembles the acculturation of a minority child. They have become a minority within a minority, so to speak.

When this happens, we have reached a moment of power. We have once again become masters in our own communities. But at what price? Our identity? Our culture? Our language? Can we, in the words of Dr Peter Nigroni, say “Hispano [Franco], your moment has come. Do not let it go by.”? (See Appendix)

PROGNOSIS/RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE :

We have reached a point in the history of our people where we must now decide whether we will be just Americans or Franco-Americans, whether we will be part of the “melting pot” or part of the “salad.” (Magnus-Brown, 1993). Do we wish to maintain our identity, or will we blend into a tapestry of “too much assimilation and acculturation” where “many of the traditions and cultures of the United States will be permanently lost, and ... the United States will thereby be diminished rather than enriched.”? (Gagne, 1987, p. 43).

In examining the patterns of practices in school districts where French has been fostered in the elementary schools, it is my belief that those areas that have valued French enough to keep it in the elementary grades have fared much better in the preservation of their identity and their language than have those communities where French has been shunted aside as unimportant. And so, in looking toward the year 2000, let us hope that the predictions of “total assimilation” voiced by nearby towns where French has not been fostered and cherished will be proved invalid. Let us continue to preserve our right to be what we truly are, Franco-Americans. Let us be part of the “salad” rather than the “melting pot” and continue to foster our Franco-American heritage at the same time as we pride ourselves in being Americans. We can truly be both, and it is by fostering one that we foster the other.

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APPENDIX

By Peter J. Negroni

A long time ago I went to school.

I learned to be afraid of school.

It was as if I did not belong.

They told me I could not speak my language.

“We speak English here.”

Oye Mami – en la escuela no se puede hablar en espanol.

They told me I had to learn to read in English.

Forget your mother, your father and your brother.

A qui estamos en America

I was only five and yet I began to feel ashamed.

Can they make you feel ashamed at five years old?

But that they did.

The days went by and I did not know what happened.

It took years for me to know.

I grew and grew and learned their game.

I could not speak in Spanish but I did not forget.

Oye Mami – en las escuela no se puede hablar en espanol.

My mother, she did not know.

She told me I had to speak in English.

Herself – she never learned to speak in English.

But yet the world had said to her :

Forget your Spanish and if you cant’t,

Tell your children “here we speak in English.”

That they did – they were really so afraid.

But can we who have grown in this world of

“Forget your Spanish” give up so easily?

Today we know we can’t forget.

We must be proud of what we are or we face not being at all.

Oye Mami – en la escuela no se puede hablar en espanol.

The time has come for us to say

Oye Mami – mi maestra habla en espanol!

But this will never happen

Unless you speak your mind.

Hispano, ha llegado to momento.

No lo dejes pasar.

TRANSLATION :

Hispano, your moment has come.

Do not let it go by.

Poem read in keynote address for ESI/Multicultural
Education Conference (Oct., 1992) by Dr. Nigroni.

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