

Does anyone in the world care about Canadian language issues?

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In 2023, the Robarts Centre undertook a major study of the state of Canadian Studies and of Canadian Studies centres around the world. Researchers as well as executives of local associations of Canadian Studies abroad, including centres and networks, were invited to share their thoughts on the challenges of researching and teaching about Canada in their part of the world. One of the study's findings was that the country's linguistic question—the relationship between French and English, and the efforts and strategies to promote French as a common language in Québec and among francophone minority communities—left many people indifferent. Federal and official bilingualism as well as language planning policies were not a topic of study or a major theme in courses on Canada; neither were official languages and frameworks of provinces and territories. Should we conclude that students and researchers outside Canada are blasé about bilingualism in Canada's official languages?

AT FIRST GLANCE: EXPLAINING THE ABSENCE OF INTEREST

How can such a situation be explained? A first explanation would be the absence of the language issue in the public sphere. After all, there has not been a major crisis in recent years. Canadian attention has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and social and state responses, notably from public health officials. As for the language issue in Canada, the last major crisis occurred in November 2018. In Ontario's fall 2018 economic statement, delivered on November 15, the Ford government announced that the Université de l'Ontario français would disappear. Franco-Ontarians reacted strongly on November 16 and the following days. Their mobilization forced the Ontario government to reverse its decision, and the Université de l'Ontario français welcomed its first cohort of undergraduate students in September 2021.

Consequently, the lack of interest in the language issue shows that research projects and course content are influenced by current issues in Canada. This puts an end to those claims that courses in social sciences and humanities are inadequate because they ignore current issues. If studies similar to the one undertaken by the CanSearch team had been done in the recent past, it is quite possible that we would find that course topics and research projects supported by Canadian Studies centres reflected the current events of the day.

But is this a satisfactory explanation? Are there other possibilities? There is an underlying trend in Canada. So, it is not surprising that research centres and courses on Canada at universities outside Canada reflect this trend: there is a strong desire to know about, to study, and to debate Indigenous issues. The 2023 study by the CanSearch team demonstrates that there is a desire to understand the Canadian colonial project and the genocidal policy that justified the establishment of residential schools, the reserve system, and the *Indian Act* of 1876. Regardless of the language in which knowledge is created and disseminated, Canadian Studies outside the country show a marked inter-

est in Indigenous peoples. What is more, those professors and researchers who work on Canadian topics and teach about Canada at their respective universities outside Canada attest to the difficulties of teaching these subjects, owing to their emotional charge.

DIGGING DEEPER: FINDING THE RELEVANCE OF LANGUAGES IN THE STUDY OF CANADA

If interest in official languages and official language bilingualism seemed to be low in the survey, the CanSearch study did note a high interest in issues of multiculturalism, diversity, race, immigration, and newcomer settlement even though many found these topics to be challenging to teach. Although at first glance these issues seem to be non-linguistic, they are in fact—as is the case with Indigenous issues—very closely tied to issues of language; specifically, non-official language communities. Canada has experienced continued growth in racial diversity through immigration over the past several decades, which is in effect a growth in non-official language communities. According to the 2021 census, more than one in four people in Canada—26.5 percent—were from racialized communities compared to 13.4 percent in 2001 (Hou et al., 2023).

This growth in racialized communities is driven by immigration and reflected in the increase of non-official language speakers in Canada. The 2021 census determined that 4.6 million Canadians, or 12.7 percent of the population, speak a language other than English or French at home. This is a significant increase from 1991, when this proportion was 7.7 percent. The increase is a function of the growth in immigration levels over the past several decades. More notably, in 2021, 9 million people in Canada had a mother tongue other than English and French, which is the highest level recorded since this question on mother tongue was first asked in the 1901 census.

This brings us back to our opening question: Does anyone care about Canadian language issues? It would seem that there actually is a great interest in topics that are fundamentally linked to linguistic issues in Canada that go beyond just official languages. Indigenous communities have long identified language as a link to land and noted the importance of linguistic revitalization as a fundamental element of resurgence against the cultural genocide of settler-colonial dispossession, residential schooling, and the reserve systems. Furthermore, multiculturalism and immigration are fundamentally issues about linguistic diversity and exist in relation to both official and non-official language groups—in fact, often they overlap. Thus, we can understand the international interest in Indigeneity, multiculturalism, immigration, and racial diversity in Canada as an interest in language issues in Canada, even if it is incumbent on us to make those links explicit on the international stage. The CanSearch study, which identifies international Canadianists' desire for access to online tools, lectures, and related resources for teaching, learning, and research, provides us with a unique opportunity to outline how many of the identified interests in this survey are in fact also language issues. In short, it seems that the world does indeed care about Canadian language issues. ■

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