

# 19 Minority Language Schooling without Home Language Maintenance: Impact on Language Proficiency

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**Abstract** Linguistic minority groups undergoing assimilatory pressure yet fortunate enough to have at their disposal an educational system in their own language expect the schools to play an important role in the maintenance of the language. The schools are seen as having the dual 'mission' of ensuring that the students who already speak the language retain it and of teaching it to those to whom it was not transmitted in the home. But just how proficient in the minority language do the latter become? This question is examined as it applies to the French-speaking minority of the province of Ontario, Canada. Results of sociolinguistic analyses indicate that French-language schooling without home language maintenance does not make for the acquisition of native-like proficiency. The students who do not maintain French at home are then briefly compared to L2 learners in early total immersion programmes, with whom they are shown to share many features of imperfect mastery of French (grammar, lexicon, etc.). The present study thus clearly indicates that more than ever full schooling in a language is necessary for attainment of native-like proficiency.

## Introduction

Up until recently French-Canadian minorities outside Quebec and New Brunswick had limited access to instruction in French. Maintenance of French thus depended primarily on home language transmission. In fact, in many of

the French-Canadian communities located outside Quebec and New Brunswick the French language has for all practical purposes receded to this last bastion. However, even this stronghold has not escaped English-language penetration, since an increasing proportion of French-Canadians are giving up the use of their mother tongue at home, all the more when they marry outside their group (Castonguay, 1979).

Prior to the adoption of Canada's new constitution in 1982 only Quebec and New Brunswick were held by law (given their official bilingual status under the British North America Act) to provide their official linguistic minority with schooling in its mother tongue (education in English for Quebec Anglophones and in French for New Brunswick Francophones). There was no such onus on the other eight majority Anglophone provinces and so understandably they have been very reticent to grant their Francophone minorities the privilege (if not the right) of being educated in their mother tongue, all the more as education has traditionally been regarded as a strictly provincial matter. But now that Canada's two official minorities (Francophones outside Quebec and Anglophones in Quebec) enjoy an unquestionable right to education in their mother tongue enshrined in the country's new constitution, one can expect that west of Manitoba and east of New Brunswick French Canadians will be able to send their children to French-language schools rather than being faced with today's prospect of enrolling them in French-immersion programmes (set up for Canada's Anglophone children) or 'worse' still regular English-language schools (as is often the case).

Perhaps because Francophones in Ontario constitute in absolute numbers the strongest of Canada's Francophone minorities (around 475,000) and are geographically concentrated in the East and North (giving them electoral weight), measures for the expansion of French-language schooling were taken relatively earlier (1968) in this province than in Canada's other predominantly English-speaking provinces. As a result, Ontario's French-speaking minority now has at its disposal a full-fledged system of French-medium schools both at the primary and secondary levels, but still awaits a similar development at the post-secondary level (Churchill, Quazi & Frenette, 1985).

This expansion of the French-language education system in Ontario was the first in a series of important political measures to provide the province's Francophone minority with services in its language in the public sector (*e.g.* television, health care system, judicial system). These ongoing measures have brought about an important increase in the instrumental value of French by creating many new positions requiring high levels of competence in that language (Mougeon & Beniak, 1988).

Be that as it may, Franco-Ontarians, like other French-Canadian minorities, have suffered losses through assimilation into the Anglophone majority, mainly as a result of English language shift at home. Thus while the system of French-

language schools in Ontario provides children from French-speaking homes with an opportunity to add to their knowledge of vernacular French by learning its standard counterpart, it also provides children from assimilated homes (mostly, but not exclusively, the offspring of mixed marriages) with what amounts to their first real opportunity to learn French. To make a comparison, Ontario's French-language schools are not unlike Welsh-medium schools in Wales (Thomas, 1986) in that they provide the minority with a major tool not only for socio-economic betterment but also for linguistic and cultural survival, and in the latter connection offer young assimilated members of the minority a unique opportunity to retrieve their roots. An important question, then, is to what extent Ontario's French language schools are successful in their 'refrenchification' efforts. The question is all the more important as feelings are mixed within the Franco-Ontarian minority as to whether its schools should actually have, in addition to their primary mission of ensuring that the students who already speak French maintain it, a secondary mission of language retrieval (Mougeon & Beniak, 1988).

The purpose of this paper is to examine various aspects of the grammatical, lexical and sociostylistic competence of the assimilated students who attend Ontario's French-language schools with a view to answering the above question. Franco-Ontarian students from linguistically assimilated homes represent a clear case of language restriction, both from a quantitative viewpoint (they use French and are exposed to it considerably less than their counterparts who are raised in French-speaking homes) and a qualitative one (their exposure to French and use of it are largely confined to a formal and official domain). Henceforth we shall occasionally refer to them as 'school learners of French'.

## **Methodology**

Our study is guided by two general hypotheses which follow naturally from the dual aspect of language attrition just mentioned. The first is that minority language schooling without home language maintenance is in itself insufficient to ensure mastery of even basic aspects of the grammar and lexicon. The second is that the Franco-Ontarian students experiencing attrition, largely cut off as they are from the vernacular, are likely to evidence a lack of familiarity with the informal features of Canadian French. In order to test these hypotheses we carried out a comparative study of taped data on the spoken French of a total of 117 Franco-Ontarian students attending high school: school learners of French (raised in predominantly English-speaking homes and resident in a locality where Anglophones largely outnumber Francophones and hence where French is hardly used outside the home) were compared with three other groups of students who all hear and use French outside the school but who

do so to a variable extent. One of these student groups corresponds to the highest level of opportunities to hear and use French outside the school to be found in Ontario. It is made up of students who come from French-speaking homes and who reside in a predominantly French-speaking locality (Hawkesbury: 85% Francophone concentration). Another group consists of students who are also raised in French-speaking homes but who are resident in a predominantly English-speaking locality (Cornwall: 34%, North Bay: 17%, or Pembroke: 8%). The third group of students corresponds to a yet lower level of opportunities to hear and use French. It includes students who are raised in homes where English and French are used concurrently and who reside in a predominantly English-speaking locality (see above). These three comparison groups will serve to better characterise the French language competence of the school learners of French and also more generally they will allow us to more finely gauge the impact of language of schooling, home language use and community language use on learning and mastery of a minority language.

## Results

Before presenting the results we should elaborate somewhat on the linguistic features selected for comparative analysis. Because of the asymmetrical nature of the French acquisition histories of the subject groups, we selected features which were neutral in stylistic value (i.e. shared by both the vernacular and standard varieties of French). On the other hand, we also wanted to adduce linguistic evidence that the school learners of French experience a lack of familiarity with vernacular French, and so we selected features typical of this variety.

### Shared grammatical features

One grammatical feature which is shared between vernacular Canadian French and Standard French is the category of pronominal verbs. The distinguishing morphological feature of these verbs is the fact that they are used with a reflexive pronoun which is immediately preposed to the verb or auxiliary in compound forms (e.g. '*je me suis coupé*' (I cut myself); '*tu te souviens*' (you recall)). As we have shown elsewhere (Beniak, Mougeon & Côté, 1980), research on the acquisition of French in monolingual settings indicates that while L1 learners of French go through a stage where they initially omit the reflexive pronouns (i.e. use pronominal verbs like simple verbs), by about the age of 6 they use the reflexive pronouns consistently.

As can be seen in Table 1, the students resident in the majority Francophone community do not differ from Francophones in monolingual settings, since

**Table 1** Reflexive pronoun omission

<i>Home language</i>	<i>Omissions</i>	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	<i>% omission</i>
French (H)†	0	199	0
French	17	301	5
French/English	(data unavailable for this speaker category)		
English	34	199	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>699</b>	<b>7</b>

† H = Hawkesbury

they evidence a zero level of reflexive pronoun omission. The maintainers of French at home resident in a minority Francophone community are close behind with only a 5% omission rate, in contrast to the school learners of French, who delete the reflexive pronouns significantly more often (e.g. 'tu souviens' (you recall)).

Table 2 displays data which reveal a similar pattern. What is 'at stake' here is mastery of the distinctive forms of the third person plural present indicative (e.g. *ils comprennent* /köpRɛn/ (they understand)). As we have argued elsewhere (Mougeon & Beniak, 1981), these distinctive forms are irregular or marked, that is morphologically unpredictable, but again, like the pronominal verbs, they are mastered early by L1 learners of French. Table 2 shows again that the students from the majority Francophone community have no trouble with this aspect of the grammar of French and that the same applies for the maintainers of French at home resident in the Francophone minority communities. The school learners of French and the students from bilingual homes, in contrast, have still not reached mastery of the distinctive third person plural forms, for which they tend to substitute the unmarked sg. forms (e.g. *ils comprennent* /köpRä/ (they understand)).

**Table 2** Levelling of the distinctive third person plural present indicative forms

<i>Home language</i>	<i>Levellings</i>	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	<i>% levelling</i>
French (H)	7	540	1
French	12	673	2
French/English	270	1897	14
English	203	1074	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>4184</b>	<b>12</b>

### Shared lexical features

While English uses 'be' to express a state, French resorts to two verbs: '*être*' (the translation equivalent of 'be') and '*avoir*' (the translation equivalent of 'have'). Although it could be reasonably argued that it is less 'natural' to express a state via a non-stative verb like '*avoir*' than via '*être*', the verb phrases which feature stative '*avoir*' are very frequent and therefore do not pose lasting learning problems for L1 learners of French. In Table 3 we provide data on the mastery of one of the more frequent set expressions featuring stative '*avoir*', namely '*avoir peur*' (to be scared/afraid).

As can be seen, only the school learners of French have problems with this verb phrase, in which they tend to replace '*avoir*' with '*être*' (e.g. '*je suis peur*' literally 'I am fright/fear'). This erroneous alternative is most probably due to interference (use of '*être*' on the model of 'be') and to a faulty decoding of the articleless French noun '*peur*' as an adjective. Essentially similar results were found for another basic verb phrase containing stative '*avoir*', that is '*avoir X ans*' (to be X years old).

Let us now turn to a more specialised aspect of French lexical usage: the use of a preposition to express location on the spoken media, that is on TV, on the radio or on a particular channel or station (e.g. '*j'ai entendu ça à la radio*' (I heard it on the radio); '*je l'ai vu au canal 17*' (I saw it on channel 17)).

In locative contexts such as in Table 4 the students from Hawkesbury (the majority Francophone locality) consistently use the generic preposition of location '*à/au*', a finding which is in conformity with contemporary Quebec French usage (Beniak, Mougeon & Valois, 1981). In sharp contrast, the school learners of French overwhelmingly prefer preposition '*sur*' to '*à*'. Once more we may suspect that this departure from the monolingual norm is due to interference (English uses the preposition 'on', the equivalent of '*sur*' in the same contexts). What is noteworthy in this particular case, however, is that the maintainers of French at home resident in the Francophone minority communities are this time not immune to interference.

**Table 3** Mastery of stative '*avoir*'

<i>Home language</i>	<i>Substitution of 'être'</i>	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	<i>% substitution</i>
French (H)	0	8	0
French	0	30	0
French/English	0	80	0
English	14	27	48
Total	14	145	9

**Table 4** Mastery of locative 'à'

<i>Home language</i>	<i>Substitution of 'sur'</i>	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	<i>% substitution</i>
French (H)	0	16	0
French	5	19	26
French/English	41	50	82
English	37	42	88
Total	83	127	65

**Table 5** Familiarity with possessive 'à'

<i>Home language</i>	<i>'à'</i>	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	<i>% 'à'</i>
French (all communities)†	10	38	26
French/English	11	44	25
English	0	24	0
Total	21	106	20

† Conflation of majority and minority Francophone community speakers due to sparse data.

### Features of vernacular French

The use of preposition 'à' to introduce possessive nominal complements is a feature of informal Canadian French with, however, definite 'popular' (i.e. lower class) connotations (e.g. '*le char à ma soeur*' (my sister's car)). In this context Standard French uses preposition 'de' instead (Beniak & Mougeon, 1984).

As can be seen, the school learners of French differ sharply from the maintainers of French at home in that their spoken French includes no instances of possessive 'à'. Lack of familiarity with informal Canadian French need not always be total, however, as the next case shows.

As in English, it is possible, in informal Canadian French, to use 'être' (be) as a verb of motion in past tense contexts (e.g. '*As-tu déjà été en France?*' (Have you ever been to France?)). The school learners of French (see Table 6) use the informal '*avoir été*' variant, but do so appreciably less frequently than the maintainers of French at home resident in the minority Francophone localities. Their greater familiarity with this feature of informal French than with possessive 'à' may be due to the higher frequency of occurrence and lack of popular connotations of the former and/or to convergence (positive reinforcement of the English translation equivalent 'have been').

**Table 6** Familiarity with 'avoir été' to express motion

<i>Home language</i>	'Avoir été'	<i>Obligatory contexts</i>	% 'avoir été'
French (H)	(data unavailable for this speaker category)		
French	70	99	71
French/English	230	277	83
English	81	154	53
Total	381	530	72

## Discussion

Viewed in the broader context of sociolinguistic research on minority languages, the present findings on the French-language competence of Franco-Ontarian students have a familiar ring (see Table 7 for a summary; a plus indicates conformity with or close approximation to the conservative norm, a minus a significant departure from it). Indeed, we are not the first to have shown that members of minority language groups who exhibit a high level of restriction in the use of the minority language (in this study the school learners of French, represented as the next to last row in Table 7), speak it in a form which, judging by a comparison with the conservative norm of the wider community (in this study, that embodied by speakers resident in a majority Francophone environment, who belong to a staunchly French family and who have attended a minority language school — represented as the top row in Table 7), contains various signs of incomplete learning: simplifications of the grammar, interlinguistic transfer affecting the lexicon, and stylistic reduction — lexical or other (Dorian, 1981; Gal, 1984; Giacalone Ramat, 1979; Hill & Hill, 1977; King, 1985). Such speakers have variously been called 'imperfect learners', 'semi-speakers', 'L2-like learners', etc.

**Table 7** Summary of differential levels of mastery of French as a function of French language use in different societal domains

<i>Use of French:</i>			<i>Distinctive</i>			<i>Possessive</i>		
<i>School</i>	<i>Home</i>	<i>Comm.</i>	<i>Locative</i>	<i>3 pl. verb</i>	<i>Reflexive</i>	<i>'Avoir peur'</i>	<i>'à'</i>	<i>'Avoir été'</i>
			<i>'à'</i>	<i>forms</i>	<i>pronouns</i>			
+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	no data
+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	+
+	+/-	-	-	-	no data	+	+	+
+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
+/-	-	-	no data	-	-	-	no data	-

It should be pointed out that the kind of stylistic reduction which has been documented by the above mentioned researchers affects the *formal* register of the minority language and thus is a mirror image of that reported here. The reason for this is that formal style reduction is the result of minority language restriction to the private domains of society (a typical development in minority language communities undergoing shift, and deprived of an L1 school system) whereas our 'imperfect speakers' of French, as we have made it abundantly clear, have by and large learned the language in the formal domain of the school. This study, then, has verified the two central hypotheses concerning the French language proficiency of school learners of French: minority language schooling on its own is not sufficient to guarantee attainment of native or even native-like competence in French, be it the standard or vernacular variety. Full backing of the home is essential for this ideal attainment. As row 2 of Table 7 indicates, students from Francophone minority communities who have maintained French at home depart from the conservative norm on only one feature: use of '*sur*' instead of '*à*' to indicate location on the spoken media. This interference-based substitution may be due to the fact that in Francophone minority communities members of the young generation (whatever their level of maintenance of French at home) overwhelmingly consume English-language spoken media. Another explanation, not necessarily mutually exclusive, would be that the home language maintainers have simply 'picked up' this feature from their more bilingual peers, in whose speech it is much more ingrained (see Table 4 above). In any case, such innovations owing to the influence of the majority language would seem to us to be unavoidable and hence natural. They illustrate the emergence of new community norms arising from intensive linguistic contact (Haugen, 1977; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1985).

Concomitant use of French and English in the home, however, affects more than mastery of specialised lexical usage since, as can be seen from row 3 of Table 7, basic (although irregular) grammatical features are not fully mastered under this condition. On the other hand, Franco-Ontarian students from bilingual homes resist the grosser forms of interference (e.g. calques such as '*être peur*') and do not lack familiarity with the vernacular norm.

Franco-Ontarian students who come from homes where French is not or little used have problems with *all* of the aspects of French investigated here, whether basic lexical or grammatical features, more specialised lexical usage or typical features of the vernacular. Having referred to these speakers as 'L2-like learners' of French, it is interesting to see how they in fact compare with their nearest counterparts among English-Canadian L2-learners of French, namely Anglophone children enrolled in an early total French immersion programme (i.e. entire curriculum in French during the early grades followed by a gradual increase in the amount of instruction

time in English). As can be seen from the last row of Table 7, immersion students show the same linguistic profile as the Franco-Ontarian school learners of French (the immersion findings reported here are from Beniak, 1984; Canale, Mougeon & Beniak, 1978; and Harley, 1986). However, these qualitative similarities conceal quantitative differences. Indeed, whenever comparisons between same-aged immersion and Franco-Ontarian students (i.e. school learners of French) have been made regarding these or other linguistic features, the immersion students have shown a lower level of mastery (Beniak, 1984; Canale, Mougeon & Beniak, 1978; Harley, 1979). This may be interpreted as a reflection of the fact that immersion students (a) receive less instruction time in French and (b) are less exposed to native-speaker models of French at school and, more crucially as far as sociostylistic competence is concerned, outside the school (Harley & Swain, 1984).

## Conclusion

Franco-Ontarian parents who do not hand down French to their offspring at home — for reasons that may seem perfectly valid to them, for example English-speaking spouse, concern that their children master the language of the majority as early as possible — but who nonetheless avail themselves of the opportunity of schooling their children in French, must be made aware of the fact that such transfer of responsibility for French language transmission will produce results falling well short of native competence. In fact, whether students from assimilated households should be admitted at all to Franco-Ontarian schools is currently a source of much controversy. It is feared by many Franco-Ontarian parents and educators (reported in Desjarlais *et al.*, 1980; Heller *et al.*, 1985) that low-proficiency speakers may have a retarding effect on both the scholastic and linguistic achievement of the students from non-assimilated households. As we have already pointed out in the introduction, the instrumental value of French (i.e. its importance as a language of work, especially) has increased significantly in Ontario over the last 10 years or so. It is understandable, then, that it matters to some Franco-Ontarian parents and educators that the French language school system produce students that have the best possible qualifications — linguistic and academic — to fill the increasing number of job positions that require knowledge of French. In other words, though the decision not to pass on French to one's children is an individual matter, it is not without implications for the collectivity and so, some would argue, is also a matter of social responsibility.

Some of the linguistic difficulties of the school learners of French could probably find a solution in a modification of the traditional normative approach which still characterises the pedagogy of French (Cazabon & Frenette, 1982). In this regard, the much more communicative approach now being proposed for implementation in Franco-Ontarian schools is entirely felicitous in that, by turning the minority language school into a locus of authentic communication — not just in language arts classes but curriculum-wide — it should at least partly counteract the trend toward minority language disuse at home. However, it would be unrealistic to hope that even with this new pedagogical approach the minority language school could bridge the linguistic gap between the students from assimilated and non-assimilated homes. Still, it is in itself not a negligible outcome that such schools can enable assimilated members of the young generation to recover — albeit incompletely — their linguistic *and* cultural heritage and thus to develop a sense of belonging to the minority community (Dorian, 1987). It must be remembered, however, that not all members of the minority will view this as a desirable objective for Ontario's French language schools.

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