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"It's All French Over There": My Quest for Franco-Ontarians around Lake Erie

Roger W. Anderson
Central State University/ USA

ABSTRACT

As an Ohio-based (U.S.) French instructor and francophile, I explored Ontario (Canada) in search of Franco-Ontarian communities. Eager to understand their position within larger anglophone-dominant spheres -- positions that are unique from neighboring Francophone communities of Quebec-- I traveled to such communities. An international border divides Lake Erie, thus making Ontario a polity bordering Ohio. Inspired by a provincial-government map documenting communities of Francophone communities, I took advantage of a winter break to wander via automobile. Finding little public evidence of French, I was often told to venture "over there". This adventure led me to important discoveries about the perceptions of minority linguistic communities amongst anglophone Ontarians, which become clearer through Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. This quest for Franco-Ontarians made me revisit my own cultural assumptions. Findings encourage more nuanced understandings of the nature of minority linguistic communities and the ways in which they are represented.
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Keywords: bilingualism, Bronfenbrenner, Canada, Foucault, Francophone, French, *La Francophonie*, Quebec

INTRODUCTION

Starting a French-teaching position at Ohio's only public historically black university (HBCU), I was told that any study abroad program I designed in Western Europe would fail due to unaffordable costs for students. According to recent reports, African-American / Black students make up 13% of enrollments within U.S. post-secondary institutions, yet only accounted for 5% of students studying abroad in 2019-2020.Conversely, Caucasian students comprised only 54% of enrollment yet 70% of all study abroad programs that year (NAFSA,

2021). So transformative are study abroad programs, efforts are afoot to increase the number of African-American students studying abroad as part of larger strategies to enhance internationalization within HBCU's (Bista & Pinder, 2022).

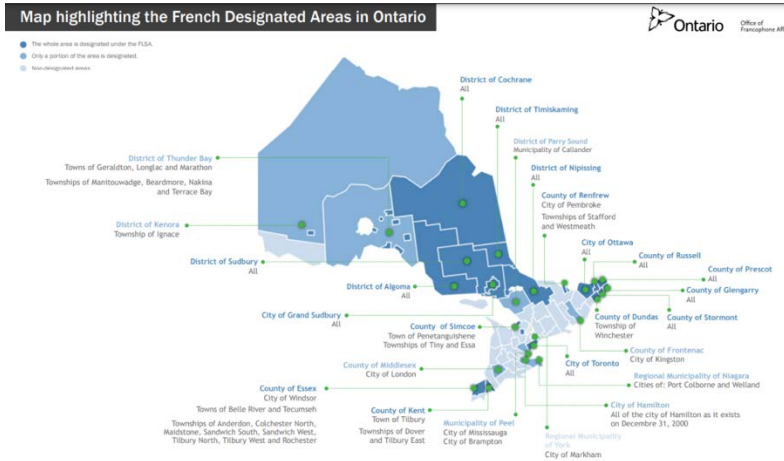
As a learner, my own French was greatly facilitated by living abroad. Being located in Ohio, I thought maybe I could design a program for my French learners to nearby Canada. Ohio is a state with a maritime border with Ontario, Canada. As an officially bilingual country, most of Canada's francophone (French-speaking) population resides mostly in Quebec, a province bordering New England. Notwithstanding, francophone communities are peppered throughout Canada, including the throughout Ontario, Canada's predominantly anglophone, most populous province. In my pursuit of all things French, I stumbled across a map issued by the Ontario government that identified 26 communities in the province, each claiming more than 5,000 Francophones (Office of Francophone Affairs Ontario, June 4, 2022). As registered communities, their citizens are entitled to receive government services in both English and French, unlike the rest of province, which provides services only in English.

I was shocked to see, mapped on to the part of Canada I know well through numerous visits before, , -parts of Canada only a few hours drive from our university, were Francophone communities (see Image 1)! Is it really the case that people live their lives in French so close to Ohio? How wonderful it would be to offer a flightless study abroad program, immersing my students in French!

MY QUEST BEGINS

I was determined to find these mysterious Franco-Ontarian communities, to verify that French was spoken so close by. Over winter vacation, I drove from Ohio to Detroit and crossed into Canada. "WELCOME / BIENVENUE" read the sign above the border. (An internationalizing educator, I love living within a short drive of an international border).

Image 1. Registered Franco-Ontarian communities



I spent one week driving around Ontario to these communities, these islands in an anglophone sea- islands that I never knew existed. Some were cities with multiple intersections and abundant gas stations and stores, while others were villages with a singular gas station and general store. Once arrived in a supposedly French-speaking place, I inspected every business's signage I drove past. All were in English, in every town. Only courthouses' and post offices' signs --government buildings—used both French and English (see Image 2). This finding added to my skepticism of the presence of French speakers here.

Image 2. An Ontarian courthouse (photo taken by R. Anderson, 2021)

Within these communities, I visited places one would expect to hear conversation: McDonalds, coffee shops, grocery stores, etc. Like a spy, I would sip coffee and pretend to flip through my I-phone, listening to conversations around me. After two decades of French study, I could detect spoken French amidst English chatter. Instead of French, what I overheard was English -identical to my own.

If there were no customers, I would awkwardly ask cashiers about the area's French-speakers. Finding no success, I even called municipal government offices of these communities. The reply was nearly always the same: "There are some French speakers here, but if you go to (the next community over), it's all French over there." Or, I was told, "My grandmother spoke only French. Me, no, I lost it years ago." It was even suggested, on multiple occasions, that I visit nursing homes in the region to meet French speakers.

So I would get in my car and drive to the next community, usually a village with a French name, like Pain Court ("Short Bread") or Pointe-Aux-Roches (Stoney Point), centered around a beautiful Catholic church and a French school beside it. Unfortunately for my quest, churches were closed during the week, and Canadian school administrators were not welcoming of foreign visitors arriving unannounced during school hours (and rightfully so).

Frustrated, I brainstormed ways to determine if French-speakers lived in these communities. Since my family members and friends --of all ages-- utilize the public library, and as a public space in which I could conduct my covert operations, I searched out public libraries. I devised that if shelves were stocked with materials in French, then Francophones must be present (See Image 3). If a library offered no materials in French, Francophones weren't necessarily absent nor present.

Over the course of a week, using I-phone Maps, I located and visited five public libraries, typically within shopping centers or neighborhoods. Bigger than most adjacent stores, these libraries were well-stocked with books, DVD's, CD's, and newspapers, spread throughout several different rooms. Patrons were seated in comfy armchairs or desks, reading what interested them. Of these libraries, the largest French collection numbered approximately one third of the library's entire collection. See Image 3 for one library's nice selection of young adult novels in French, clearly marked for French readers. I decided that Francophones MUST live in this community… yet curiously, when I asked a librarian, I was again told to visit a nearby community where it was "all French".

Image 3. French-language Materials at a public library (photo taken by R. Anderson 2021)

AIR BNB-ING AROUND ONTARIO

Appreciating "Francophone" and "Franco-Ontarian"

An unfixed itinerary allowed me to venture north of Lake Erie to the region near Lake Huron's Georgian Bay. Staying in Air BnB's was best suited for my quixotic adventure. I could reserve a room in a private home, cheaply, the same day. Once arrived, I would chat with my hosts, explaining my linguistic quest. On one occasion, my hosts provided insights that shifted my paradigm.

In a snowy city, I rented the basement apartment of a home owned by an elderly couple. "Oh, my husband is a Francophone," the woman exclaimed. Excited to meet him, when I finally got the opportunity, I said, "Bonjour, vous allez bien?" to which he responded, "Oh yes, welcome." When I continued in French, I got only English in return.

He explained the whole neighborhood, his childhood neighborhood, was once populated by Francophones. He married an English-speaker and hadn't spoken French much ever since. And yet, he described still a proud Franco-Ontarian, even if the French language is no longer an active part of his life.

Conversation with him opened my eyes to a critical aspect of Francophone Ontario that I hadn't previously understood: being Franco-Ontarian does not mean that one speaks French necessarily. The label "Francophone" is used for people whose ancestry was French and French-speaking, even if one no longer speaks French.

Where are the Francophones?

Visiting yet another "French" village, I experienced another epiphany. The village comprised a modest strip of commercial stores whose signage was in English, including a local grocery store.

Hoping to finally overhear French being spoken, I entered the grocery store and wandered around (secretly eavesdropping on shoppers). Nothing but English. All aisles were labelled in English. The cashier was speaking English with customers. This is French-speaking village? Wrong!

Needing a snack, I looked for granola bars but didn't find them. I asked an employee, a young man with long hair. He told me their aisle number. I went there, retrieved them, and proceeded to the checkout. How disappointing.

While I was paying the cashier, the same long-haired employee passed by the check-out line. The employee working the cash register – who was speaking English minutes earlier, said to him "Ça va, toi? T'es toujours ici?" (How's it going? You're still here?). "Pour le moment, ouais." (For the moment, yeah).

Francophones! Covert Francophones, but wholly bilingual! The exchange lasted but a second, yet I felt enlightenment fall upon me. These employees, seemingly no different than monolingual-English Ohioans, were natively using North American English --the same as my own-- were covertly bilingual French speakers.

Flabbergasted, I returned to my car to eat my snack, analyzing what I had just learned. No products and no aisles were labelled in French, nor was any customer speaking French. And so, I hadn't asked about my granola bars in French. Based on what I observed, speaking German would have been just as appropriate as speaking French in that store.

And yet, the store employees were using French between themselves. With my very own ears, I heard it.

I realized Franco-Ontarians have no obligation to me --or to anyone-- to speak French, to use French signs, or to exist in ways others conceive of them to exist. It seems I was finally beginning to understand the complexities of Franco-Ontarians.

Understanding What I Learned

Theorizations from sociology and education helped me understand what I had experienced. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offered a three-step method for doing sociological research. First, researchers must break with common sense. Cutting

through famed theorist Pierre Bourdieu's sometimes dense theories, Bourdieu-scholar Atkinson (2020) summarized:

we have to break with the 'illusion of transparency' and bear in the mind 'principle of non-consciousness' by which Bourdieu essentially meant we have to recognize that our experience does not reflect 'how the world actually is' and that, in fact, the social world tends to work through forces of which we are not generally aware (2020, p. 23)

My epiphany in the grocery store broke my preconception of Franco-Ontarians as living in clearly marked hamlets, separate from Anglo-Ontarians, who speak only French, all the time.

Upon return, I began reading the scholarship on Franco-Ontarians. I learned that the term "Franco-Ontarian" itself came into use in the 1880's, supplanting "French Canadians in Ontario" (Gaffield, 1987, p. xv). Moreover, I learned that the government of Ontario redefined francophones in 2009 to be more inclusive. Today, the identity Francophone also applies to, "those whose mother tongue is neither French nor English, but who have a particular knowledge of French as an Official Language and use French at home" (Office of Francophone Affairs, Nov. 24, 2009). In Bourdieu's terms, I am learning the degree of my own ignorance.

Despite being a professor in the U.S., I became a foreign student in Ontario. As such, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development helps to explain my discoveries. The model posits that learners' development is impacted by five levels of systems, each being encapsulated in the next level like a set of Russian nesting dolls. A simplified view of each level within the model, moving from smallest to largest, is as follows:

The microsystem is where individuals interact. The mesosystem contains processes occur between microsystems: in the case of education, the school and the home are two microsystems that impact one another. Next, the exosystem encompasses the microsystems, "(which) trickle down…through the other people involved in the individual's life" (Ettakal & Mahoney, 2017, p. 4). In the case of a child's education, the extracurricular interests of parents may influence which extracurricular activities they introduce to their children. Finally, the macrosystem is the overarching set of beliefs and values embedded in the organization of society (Ettakal & Mahoney, 2017, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

Understanding What I learned

My quest was one for microsystems, for French speakers, yet because I was coming from a U.S. largely monolingual (anglophone) microsystem, I expected microsystems there to similarly be (francophone) monolingual. Moreover, I realized how the map I was using, which deceptively colored whole regions of Ontario as populated by French speakers, reinforced my monolingual expectation. Unlike a previous vacation to Quebec, where I enjoyed immersing myself in French, the Franco-Ontarians were less conspicuous.

Moreover, my grocery store epiphany also demonstrated that rather than systems being nested like Russian dolls, the systems of Franco-Ontarians seem to be networked. A network configuration, "shifts the focus away from the place

where social interactions occur to the individuals engaged in social interaction within that place" (Ettakal & Mahoney, 2017, p. 6). Here, French was spoken in that space, but not to me, an outsider. As such, the interlocutors mattered more than the space itself.

As for the space, Foucault's theorization elucidates why French was always something "over there". Foucault (1984) posited that while utopias, "are sites with no real place", heterotopias are, "real places…which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites… are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1984, p. 3). To elaborate, he explained that the mirror is heterotopic because, when gazing into it:

it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault, 1984, p. 3), For the numerous Anglo-Ontarians I asked, the community "over there" were heterotopias. They are absolutely real, but also unreal when considering two of Foucault's six principles defining features of heterotopias.

First, heterotopias most often are rooted in slices of time, or when people break with time as it unfolds (Foucault, 1984). For many Anglo-Ontarians I asked, their perception of a community being "all French" was likely true, but only in a distant past. Their perception was one of Francophone communities, preserved in hardened amber, unchanged despite the passing of decades. Although I scoffed at those who suggested I visit nursing homes to gain contemporary understanding of French's use in the region, these folks' astute perceptions countered the heterotopic views of their peers. It may be that a sadness, over the disappearance of French --or its eventual disappearance-- from the region, leaves Anglo-Ontarians believing in the heterotopic "over there".

Secondly, heterotopias, "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both insolates them and makes them penetrable". Foucault posits that heterotopic sites are of one of two types: one is not publicly accessible and requires permission to enter. The other are sites, "that generally hide curious exclusions: everyone can enter… but in fact that is only an illusion" (Foucault, 1984, p. 7-8). What I discovered in the grocery store was latter: the space was welcoming, yet it concealed a curious exclusion. In this heterotopia, only those who legitimately belonged, as native Francophones, had access to French. Despite its deceptive English-only appearance, French was present in the grocery store. The Anglo-Ontarians who directed me to this community likely viewed it exclusionary, not accessible to the non-French, despite the abundant presence of English. In this way, their geographic location adjacent to this "all French" community likely magnified difference, rendering the community a heterotopia.

To Fellow Quest-Takers

Having returned from Ontario, I acquiesced to the reality that Franco-Ontarian communities would not offer my students on a potential study abroad program as immersive an experience in French as would a trip to Quebec, Canada's only officially monolingual, francophone province. Notwithstanding,

my quest led to unanticipated linguistic discoveries and lessons in intercultural competence that will remain with me. These discoveries reinforced Bourdieu's notion that our own experiences do not reflect the realities of the world, and that are perceptions must be malleable as we encounter new information, cultures, and ways of being and thinking.

We must recognize that the various systems to which we belong, the micro- through exo-system, are not in fact the only ones possible. Moreover, new systems may look unrecognizable from the vantage of our own systems. And not even American professors visiting a country as similar as Canada, are impervious to this short-sightedness. For me, overcoming it meant putting into brackets my previous trips to neighboring Ontario and time enjoying being immersed in French within Quebec. I had to recognize bilingualism as a norm that relegated French to private usages within public spaces, to networks of which I was not a part. It also required me to think critically about the heterotopias Anglo-Ontarians offered me.

To those who seek to understand other's cultures, whether students or scholars, be wary of what you think you know of the targeted culture and language. Be wary of the labels used and representations of culture, those both printed on maps or embedded in the memories of informants (like Anglo-Ontarians), as they may point only towards heterotopias. Be open to having your expert knowledge upended. Then go home, and read up, and return to the quest better informed.

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Author bio

ROGER W. ANDERSON, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of International Languages & Cultures at Central State University (Wilberforce, OH, USA). His major research interests lie in the area of applied linguistics, international education, Arabic language pedagogy, *La Francophonie*, and international students in higher education. Email: randerson@centralstate.edu