

What is English Canada?: Reflection from the Point of View of Language and Identity

Takashi NIWA

1. Introduction

In Canada, the term “English Canada” is often used. In this paper, the idea of English Canada will be revisited from the point of view of language and collective identity. Canada has two official languages, English and French, and the country consists of those who predominantly speak English (anglophones) and those who predominantly speak French (francophones). Both live all throughout Canada, but most francophones live in the province of Quebec (henceforth, Quebec), where more than 80% of the province’s population are francophones. Quebec’s provincial language law (*Charter of French Language*) stipulates that French is the only official language of the province¹. In the other provinces and territories of Canada, English is mainly used. Therefore, in contrast with French-speaking Quebec, they are called “English-speaking Canada” or “English Canada.” (This paper will henceforth use “English Canada.”)²

From the 1960s, when the neo-nationalism of Quebec arose during the Quiet Revolution, the history of Canada may be partially described by the conflict between English Canada and Quebec. However, does English Canada really exist? The main concern of this paper is to determine whether we can consider English Canada as a real collective entity or not.

In the next section, we will consider the idea of language and the identity of Quebec and confirm that Quebec can be construed as a collectivity (or a nation) based on French language in the territory of the province. In the third section, we will verify whether the idea of language and identity of English Canada can be compared to that of Quebec. We will show that English cannot be a basis for English Canada and English Canada does not share any collective identity. Finally, we will conclude that English Canada is a pseudo-entity, and it emerges only when it is compared to Quebec.

2. Quebec’s Idea of Language and Its Identity

Niwa (2008, 2013) discussed the idea of the language and identity of Quebec in detail. In short,

¹ Canada has no province or territory which has any language law recognizing English as the sole official language of the province or the territory.

² English Canada does not exclude French, but the provinces and territories differ in attitude toward French, depending on the presence of francophones and its history. Since one third of the population of New Brunswick is made up of francophones, it recognizes English and French, the two official languages of Canada, as official languages of the province. It is Canada’s only officially bilingual province. Ontario has a large population of francophones whose linguistic rights are protected to some degree. Other provinces provide special status to French somehow, given that it is one of the two official languages of Canada. However, in the west of Canada, we observe *de facto* English monolingualism. The Northwest Territories recognize 9 indigenous languages as well as English and French as official languages of the territories. Nunvut’s official languages are English, French, and two Inuit languages (Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun).

because of historical reasons, French Canadian descendants account for the majority of Quebec and the Quebec society was stable from the point of view of ethnicity. In the 1960s, when Quebec began to accept a great number of immigrants from diverse countries, the immigrants tended to transfer from their native languages to English, which is dominant, powerful and useful in North America, including Canada. The French-Canadian majority found the trend critical because it could endanger Quebec’s linguistic and cultural character. Thus, in the 1970s, the Quebec government enthusiastically put forward language policies that empowered French to be the official language in Quebec, and now the French language’s status is established firmly in Quebec. A recent survey in Quebec shows that support for French as its official language is considerably high even among non-francophones: 95.1% of the population agree that inhabitants in Quebec should have the ability to speak French, and 92.4% answer that immigrants in Quebec should acquire French first after arriving there (cf. M.Pagé, C.-É. Olivier, 2012).

During this period, Quebec’s identity changed drastically. In the former Quebec, the identity of French Canadians, including French Canadian descendants outside Quebec but excluding English Quebecers and Aboriginal Quebecers, was dominant, whereas in the 1980s, the new identity of the Québécois, including all inhabitants in Quebec but excluding French Canadian descendants outside Quebec, gradually replaced the old identity, and at the end of the 20th century, the new identity surpassed the old one. This change is shown by a survey result that most Quebecers have a strong sense of belonging to Quebec as shown in the following table. The table shows that more than 85% of the population have a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to Quebec, though Quebecers who originated from France account for less than 80% of the population. This fact means that this affiliation to Quebec is not limited to French descendant Quebecers, but is shared among most habitants of the province. A more impressive and unique result for Quebec is that the sense of belonging to the province exceeds the sense of belonging to Canada. This preference is not observed in other provinces and territories.

	Sense of belonging to Canada		Sense of belonging to province	
	Very strong	Somewhat strong	Very strong	Somewhat strong
Canada	58.1%	30.2%	37.0%	45.1%
Quebec	35.7%	41.3%	45.0%	40.2%

(2008 General Social Survey: Selected Tables on Social Engagement, Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-640-x/89-640-x2009001-eng.htm>)

This collective identity is called “Québécois identity,” which is defined as “francophonie nord-américaine.” Francophones occupy only 2% of the whole population of North America, and through their history, they have had a fear of disappearing through the strong pressure of English. Their desire for survival explains the central position of French in their identity well. Thus, they feel the acquisition of French as a common language is the minimal condition to become a Québécois. French is the pivot of the Québécois identity. Therefore, Quebec always persists in French monolingualism, maintaining the Charter

of the French Language.

Given the fact that Quebecers who originated from France account for the overwhelming majority in Quebec, the French Quebec culture can constitute the core of Quebec culture. This led Quebec to create its own idea of social integration in place of the more common Canadian multiculturalism. The idea is called “interculturalism³.” It aims to integrate all members to a core culture through interactions with it, while multiculturalism denies a core culture, considering every culture equal. Quebec refuses multiculturalism because the French Quebec culture remains firm in Quebec. In short, the recognition of French as the sole common language and the adoption of interculturalism provide Quebec with unique characteristics in Canada. Quebecers can have self-assertion based on its own new identity “Québécois.” Can we find any similar elements that would assure social cohesion for English Canada?

3. English Canada’s Idea of Language and Its Identity

Though English Canadians may have had a British identity until the mid-20th century, it gradually disappeared as Canada seceded from Great Britain and the increase in the number of immigrants diluted the Britishness of English Canada. Whereas, in the 1960s, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism discussed “an equal partnership between the two founding races,” in the 1970s, Canada turned toward bilingualism and multiculturalism. The former recognizes English and French as two official languages of Canada (official bilingualism), and the latter denies a core culture. This situation contrasts with that of Quebec, which has one official language and one core culture.

At present, Canadians who originated from Britain are not the majority of English Canada, which consists of people with various ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the British Canadian culture cannot be a basis to unite English Canada. In addition, English Canada is not a political entity. Then, how can we define the identity of English Canada? Resnick (1995) and Angus (2008) claim that, faced with the lack of their self-assertiveness, English Canadians began to pursue their own identity at the end of the 20th century. According to them, the properties of English Canadians are not distinguishable from those of Canadians. “English Canadians took themselves to be simply Canadians outright” (Angus 2003: p.4). The identity of English Canada came to be easily confused with the identity of Canada. Angus (2003) calls this phenomenon “slide,” and he claims that “the slide between English Canada and Canada covers a conceptual confusion that was an historically effective structuring factor in English Canadian identity.” (Angus 2003: p.4)

In Canadian discussions, the expression “English Canada” is often used, and the use of the schema “Quebec vs. English Canada” is common. However, the meaning of English Canada is not clear. It is not easy to define “English Canada.” In practice, “English Canada” stands for the part of Canada where English is *mainly* used for public purposes, by the people living there, and by the political and social institutions altogether.

Certainly, English Canadians, people who use English for public communication, has a reality, but

³ As for interculturalism, see G. Bouchard (2013).

does “English Canada” which they reside have a reality? Is it a cohesive entity? English Canada is called “Canada outside Quebec,” “Canada without Quebec,” and “the Rest of Canada.” Can English Canada be defined without referring to Quebec? These strange appellations show two problems. The first is that they presuppose that only Quebec is unique and that the other parts of Canada can be treated uniformly. The second is that English Canada can be expressed only as the residual part of Canada. Generally speaking, identity cannot be understood substantially, but relatively. That is, one group’s identity is constructed based on its differences from other groups: “We are different from them.” However, identity usually becomes substantialized in a group’s collective mind and is expressed self-assertively as “we are such as A.” This is the case for Quebec. English Canada cannot be expressed assertively. It is nothing other than the “Rest of Canada,” “Canada outside Quebec,” or “Canada without Quebec.” Can such a definition give English Canada self-assertiveness or cohesiveness?

English Canada wanted to distinguish itself from the United States. Historically speaking, English Canadians’ building of Canadian identity proceeded in comparison with its southern neighbors, i.e., the Americans:

“South” vs. “North”

Individualism vs. Communitarism

Melting pot vs. Mosaic

English Canadians have been haunted by the fear that they might be swallowed by the powerful Americans who share English as common language. Therefore, they feel these differences should be emphasized continuously.

As a result, English Canada is defined as “Not-Quebec” and “Not-the US” in North America. If this is the case, we have to ask whether English Canada is a real entity.

McRoberts (2000) links the identity of English Canada with the constitution of 1982, which established official bilingualism, multiculturalism, and symmetrical federalism. Taylor (1993) argues the same thing. Though they are Canada’s fundamental ideas, due to the “slide” mentioned above, English Canadians have adopted these characteristics as their own identity. Official bilingualism, multiculturalism, and symmetrical federalism of Canada were enthusiastically welcome by English Canadians, but not in Quebec; thus, the characteristics have become the identity of English Canada. This is why there is no other way to define English Canada other than by referring to Quebec: “Canada outside Quebec,” “Canada without Quebec,” and “the Rest of Canada.” And, in the political domain, English Canadians, the overwhelming majority of Canadians, appear to impose their thoughts on the whole Canada, including Quebec, though Quebec refuses them⁴. This makes Quebecers have a sense of being victimized.

Canadian intellectuals often use the schema “Quebec vs. English Canada,” and Angus (2008) tries to find some philosophical cohesion in English Canada, though admitting that English Canada is a set of fragments for the time being. Kymlica (1998a) prudently suggests a possibility that a nation of English Canada may be realized in the future.

⁴ This conflict is eloquently described in Gagnon, Iacovino (2007).

However, we believe that building a cohesive collectivity of English Canada is impossible. Bouchard (2000) studied a wide range of nation-building in great detail in the new world, and showed that *imaginaires* were important for collectivities.

L'imaginaire collectif est donc le produit de l'ensemble des démarches symboliques par lesquelles une société se donne des repères pour s'ancrer dans l'espace et dans le temps, pour rendre possible la communication entre ses membres et pour se situer par rapport aux autres sociétés. (Bouchard 2000, p.14)

Can English Canadians share a collective image? We find it very difficult for the following reasons:

- (1) Now that British Canadians have become a minority, the British Canadian culture cannot be a core for cultural integration. It may be very difficult to create a common culture without any common base.
- (2) The territory of English Canadians is geographically huge and it does not have continuity because it is divided by the presence of Quebec. Therefore, territorial integrity cannot support cohesion.
- (3) Each region populated by English Canadians has a different history. English Canada has no common historical background.
- (4) Kernerman (2005: p.52) states: "English Canada is hardly uniform in its desire for national uniformity."

Given these difficulties, the English language appears to be the sole residual element which could give English Canadians cohesion. Certainly, a common language is very important for creation of an integrated collectivity. If English speaking is the sole shared feature among the provinces and territories other than Quebec, we should ask if English can provide any cohesion for English Canada. Can English unite English Canadians to become a cohesive collectivity as French created Québécois?

4. Conclusion

It is true that English is mainly used by English Canadians at the level of fact, but whether it is a core for their identity is questionable. Identity is supported by features distinctive from others. Therefore, the more distinctive the features are, the more powerful they are for identity making. We believe that the more widespread the language is, the lesser its power of identity making is. For example, since Japanese is used for ordinary communication mainly in Japan⁵, it makes an important basis for Japanese identity. Similarly, the Catalan identity is based on the Catalan language and Basque identity on the Basque language. The Irish language (Gaelic), which has a small number of native speakers, is one of the two official languages of Ireland and provides a basis for the Irish identity.

On the other hand, English is so universal that it is called a "world language." This extremely powerful language has difficulty to be the basis for an identity, because English belongs no longer to a specific collectivity. This means that speakers of English will not have a conscience strong enough to insist "We

⁵ Japanese is "used" in countries that have Japanese immigrants (Peru, Brazil, USA, etc.) or countries that have a lot of Japanese tourism (the Philippines, Singapore, Korea).

are a people who speak English in Canada.” If Canadian English were explicitly distinctive from American English, just like Aussie English, Singlish, or Indian English, it would be a strong identity marker. Rather, as claimed by Coe (1988), Canadian English is not uniform in the vast territory of Canada.

There is another important element that would prevent English from being a basis for the identity of English Canada. As mentioned above, one of the solid basis for English Canadians’ identity is the national official bilingualism. This does not allow the provinces or territories of English Canada to define English as their sole official language, excluding French. If English Canadians want to unite English Canada through English monolingualism, the desire will conflict with the nation’s official bilingualism. There is an antinomy preventing this from occurring.

After all, we conclude that English Canada as a collectivity is just a pseudo-entity. Each province of English Canada has its own characteristics, and they cannot be united by their common properties. We observe that the pseudo-entity arises when Quebec claims its recognition as a distinctive collectivity. For example, in the cases of the repatriation of the Constitution of Canada in 1982, a series of proposed amendments to the Constitution of Canada (Meech Lake Accord in 1987, Charlottetown Accord in 1992, Calgary Declaration in 1997), caused conflicts between English Canada and Quebec which were remarkable, and English Canada seemed to have gotten together to oppose Quebec. This would prove that English Canada shows up only when Canada outside Quebec has to fight as one against Quebec. It does not have its own reality.

In short, English Canada does not have a meaning other than the sum of the provinces and territories of Canada where anglophones are a majority. In addition, English Canadians do not share any unique identity that can be compared to that of Quebec Canadians. Their identity is similar to the identity of Canada. As claimed by Kernerman (2005) (cf. *supra*), it seems that English Canadians themselves do not consider themselves a collectivity. As was stated previously, since usually no collectivity arises spontaneously, without any intention to be a collectivity, English Canada cannot be a collectivity even in the future. We repeat that English Canada is just a pseudo-entity that seems to be present only in contrast with Quebec. Therefore, Canada cannot be considered as a country consisting of English Canada and Quebec, but Canada includes internal collectivities (nations): Quebec and the indigenous peoples. This conclusion coincides with the idea of the multinationalism proposed by Kymlicka (1998a-b), McRoberts (2000), Gagnon & Iacovino (2007).

REFERENCES

- Angus, Ian (2003), “The Paradox of Cultural identity in English Canada,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, Number 10, pp. 23-38.
- (2008), *Identity and Justice*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Bouchard, Gérard (2000), *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde. Essai d’histoire comparée*, Boréal, Montréal.
- (2013), *L’interculturalisme. Un point de vue québécois*, Boréal, Montréal.
- Coe, Richard M. (1988), “Anglo-Canadian Rhetoric and Identity: A Preface,” *College English*, vol. 50, No. 8,

- Canadian Literature and Rhetoric*, pp. 849-860.
- Gagnon, Alain-G. and Raffaele Iacovino (2007), *Federalisme, Citizenship, and Quebec. Debating Multinationalism*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Kernerman, Gerald (2005), *Multicultural Nationalism. Civilizing Difference, Constituting Community*, UBC Press, Vancouver.
- Kymlicka, Will (1998a), *Finding Our Way. Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada*, Oxford University Press, Don Mills (Ontario).
- (1998b), “Multinational Federalism in Canada: Rethinking the Partnership,” *Policy Options*, March, pp.5-9.
- McRoberts. Kenneth (2000), “Cultures, Language and Nations: Conceptions and Misconceptions,” Paper presented to the Sixteenth Annual London Conference for Canadian Studies, Birkbeck College, University of London, February 26, 2000.
- Niwa, Takashi (2008), “Quebec Nation: Various Integration Models and Problems,” *The Annual Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 28, The Japanese Association for Canadian Studies, pp.19-36, (in Japanese).
- (2013) « Le multinationalisme et la centralité de la langue française pour la nationalisation du Québec », *Revue japonaise des études québécoises*, Association japonaise des études québécoises, pp.65-82, (en japonais).
- Pagé, M. et C.-É. Olivier (2012), *Importance et priorité du français pour la population québécoise : une étude exploratoire*, Conseil supérieur de la langue française, Québec.
- Resnick, Philip (1995), “English Canada: The Nation that Dares not Speak its Name,” in K. McRoberts, ed., (1995), *Beyond Quebec: Taking Stock of Canada*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, pp. 81-92.
- Statistics Canada (2008), *2008 General Social Survey: Selected Tables on Social Engagement*, Statistics Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-640-x/89-640-x2009001-eng.htm>
- Taylor, Charles (1993), *Reconciling the Solitudes. Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal.