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Brief

Research and Dissemination of Science in French: Countering Inequalities

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Summary

The Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU) is submitting this brief for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research's study entitled "Research and Scientific Publication in French."

In this brief, the FQPPU recommends actions to better document the current linguistic situation and to strengthen existing networks for creating, transmitting and disseminating research in French. Specifically, the FQPPU proposes the following:

- significantly increasing funding for French scholarly journals, university presses and knowledge dissemination activities;
- thoroughly reviewing the evaluation criteria for research funds and the funding of grant and scholarship applications submitted in French;
- implementing various measures to promote French-language research, such as the creation of specific prizes or awards;
- creating and funding a special committee dedicated to proposing and implementing concrete actions to promote the creation and dissemination of French-language research; and
- developing international alliances to promote the dissemination of science in French and establish scientific multilingualism.

The day-to-day challenges faced by francophone researchers are, for the most part, structural in nature. That is why the FQPPU is convinced that the federal government and the research funds under the responsibility of the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development play a crucial role in mitigating the inequalities generated by the status of French in research and scientific publication.

Some preliminary considerations

Founded on May 16, 1991, the FQPPU includes 18 unions and associations representing more than 8,000 university professors in Quebec. As a result, it represents the majority of francophone university professors in Canada. The issues the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research has raised about research and scientific publication in French are therefore of particular interest to the Federation's members.

However, note from the outset that the perspective underlying this brief specifically concerns the creation, transmission and dissemination of knowledge as carried out by Quebec university professors. It therefore does not address the issue of francophone minority communities in Canada, although the FQPPU stands strongly in solidarity with them. For any issue relating to them, please refer to the brief submitted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), whose concerns and recommendations on this point, as on many others, match those of the FQPPU.

This clarification, although it may seem obvious, is crucial to the issues at stake for the FQPPU, because its members do not generally see a threat to the ability to do research in French on a daily basis, although this obviously not always true. Rather, it is the upstream funding of research and the downstream dissemination of research that are major constraints on francophone researchers in Quebec and lead to increasing inequalities between individuals, teams, institutions and societies.

The transformations of scientific fields over the last 50 years have led to the widespread adoption of English as the language for disseminating research findings (although to the situation varies by discipline and location, as outlined below). These circumstances lead to a comprehensive devaluing of French in scholarly publications, with negative effects on the use of French in student grant and scholarship applications, the relative prestige of French-language universities and research about Quebec.

Therefore, the FQPPU believes that the federal government must urgently act to remedy the structural injustices that the near-total domination of English as the language of research dissemination is inflicting on Canadian francophones, whether they are professors, instructors, students or citizens.

The uncontested dominance of English: Some facts

The slow erosion of French as a language of scientific communication is certainly not new. As early as the turn of the 1980s, researchers had highlighted this shift, which was described as an obvious fact by the president of the Institute for Scientific Information, in *La Recherche*: “The most obvious symptom of the decline of the French language is the apparent refusal of French scientists to recognize that French is no longer the pre-eminent international language for scientific communication.”¹ [translation] In Canada, it was the research of professors Pierre Demers and Arnold Drapeau, among others, that drew attention to the fact that “Quebec researchers publish mainly in English.”² [translation] This finding led the Conseil de la langue française to organize a major international conference in November 1981, the proceedings of which were subsequently published.³ Among the large quantity of data presented, Drapeau’s showed that 71% of publications by researchers from the main Quebec research centres were written in English and 56% of their communications were in English, while those from the Pascal database revealed that 83.6% of Quebec researchers published their work in English (as opposed to only 33% of French researchers).⁴

Since then, multiple factors have exacerbated the dominance of English and the marginalization of French in scientific publications. This trend has even been celebrated by various commentators, including Scott L. Montgomery, who, to better defend the idea of having English be the predominant scientific language, answered his own question, *Does Science Need a Global Language?* with a resounding yes.⁵ Since then, the data have continued to show “the inevitable growth of ... English.”⁶ [translation] Indeed, in Canada, “almost all journals created since 2010 have been in English.”⁷ [translation] As for articles, the share of those published in English is nearly 100% in the medical and natural sciences, 97% in the social sciences and 90% in the arts and humanities.⁸ For articles

¹ Eugene Garfield, quoted in “L’Avenir du français dans les publications et communications scientifiques et techniques Actes du colloque international,” *Québec Éditeur officiel du Québec*, 1983, 3 vol., Vol. I, p. 113.

² Gilles Provost, “Pour des travaux payés par la population de la province/Les chercheurs québécois publient surtout en anglais,” *Le Devoir*, January 10, 1980.

³ “L’Avenir du français dans les publications et communications scientifiques et techniques,” *op. cit.*

⁴ Arnold J. Drapeau, “Les publications et les communications scientifiques. La langue utilisée par les chercheurs des Centres de recherche des universités francophones du Québec,” *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 57–134; Ginette Gablot, Jacques Michel and Bruno de Bessé, “La langue de publications des chercheurs francophones,” *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 135–170.

⁵ Scott L. Montgomery, “Does Science Need a Global Language?” Chicago, *The University of Chicago Press*, 2013.

⁶ Vincent Larivière, “Le français, langue seconde? De l’évolution des lieux et langues de publication des chercheurs au Québec, en France et en Allemagne,” *Recherches sociographiques*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 2018, pp 7 ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁸ Sylvain St-Onge et al., “Portraits et défis de la recherche en français en contexte minoritaire au Canada,” *Acfas*, June 2021, p. 49.

published by Quebec authors, this figure, although slightly different, remains at nearly 100% in the medical and natural sciences, and, while falling to 70% in the social sciences and 30% in the arts and humanities, it is also trending upward, particularly in the social sciences (where it was 50% in 1980).⁹

The uncontested dominance of English as the main language of science dissemination and, consequently, of recognition of the scientific value of research, is thus a huge issue. It affects not only francophone researchers in Canada and the francophone world, but all researchers whose first language is not English. For all these individuals, the dominance of English imposes the need to use a second, or even third, language, to dramatically different degrees of success, in their research activities, a part of their work that is often the most important in the hiring and promotion process.

Consequences of this dominance: Structural inequalities

The overwhelming use of English establishes an equivalence between publications in international journals, the scientific value of research and the use of English. Indeed, in a grant competition to support scholarly journals, the journal *Études françaises*, which is specifically devoted to French-language literature, was rejected by questioning “the journal’s claim to international stature, since the articles it publishes are written exclusively in French.”¹⁰ [translation] Clearly, then, publishing “only in French” can lead a journal to face an explicit devaluing of its scientific excellence.

A structural imbalance is therefore introduced between articles published in English and French, and between those published in international journals (most often outside of Canada) and “local” journals, with many ramifications on the number of citations the articles receive and the recognition of the journals and articles. Major inequalities have been created:

- (a) in the ability of people to obtain scientific knowledge through mastering a language. Both researchers and students and the general public who speak only French or do not know enough English to read advanced scientific articles are cut off from vast areas of knowledge. Sometimes, nearly an entire scientific field is inaccessible, especially in the medical and natural sciences. Yet, understanding the latest discoveries is a major asset in almost all sectors of contemporary society;

⁹ Vincent Larivière, “Le français, langue seconde?” *op. cit.*, p. 348.

¹⁰ Quoted by Jean-Philippe Warren and Vincent Larivière, “La diffusion des connaissances en langue française en sciences humaines et sociales. Les défis du nouvel environnement international,” *Recherches sociographiques*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 2018, p. 329.

- (b) in the ability to publish one's research or obtain grants or scholarships. The decline in the proportion of grant and scholarship applications submitted to Canada's major research funds in French is a sign of this. This trend not only has negative consequences for science (a more innovative project submitted by a researcher with a lesser command of English might be rejected on linguistic rather than scientific grounds), but, more basically, is linguistically inequitable;
- (c) in the workload and economic burden on researchers and students. The need to move from the "normal" language of work and study, French, to "the" recognized language of science dissemination, English, requires French-speaking researchers to take an additional step when reading and analyzing the published work of others, as well as in their own work when writing up their research findings. Similarly, it imposes a heavier workload on both teachers and students during coursework. Students experience varying degrees of unfairness in evaluations, insofar as the grades earned in their discipline may depend in part on their ability to understand English rather than on their understanding of the discipline's subject matter. Furthermore, in some cases this move to another language results in significant financial costs for translation, in the order of several hundred dollars per article, or even several thousand dollars for a research team or a monograph, in cases where researchers use a specialized translator before submitting their scientific output for evaluation;
- (d) in the value accorded to different areas of knowledge, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Far from being "neutral," internationally recognized journals published in English, in the United States or elsewhere, have a bias against "local" topics, compared with articles on American culture, economics, history or society. This effect is so strong that research on Canada and, especially, Quebec, is considered to have less scientific worth;
- (e) in the evaluation of professors' work, when it comes to assessing the quality of their research portfolio and any publication written in English is automatically given more weight because this is viewed as a sign of greater dissemination. Moreover, in this respect, the use of the "impact factor" in evaluating a researcher's publications also leads to biases toward English (in addition to raising serious methodological doubts);¹¹ and

¹¹ Yves Gingras, *Les Dérives de l'évaluation de la recherche. Du bon usage de la bibliométrie*, Paris, Raison d'agir, 2014.

- (f) in the value assigned to francophone universities. All the above effects are cumulative, in the struggle between the various stakeholders and institutions for the greatest scientific reputation, and constitute a structural handicap on francophone universities, whose international rankings often depend on the share of publications in English and proportion of international students.

In view of this alarming situation, the federal government and Canada's research funds must intervene to mitigate these structural inequalities as much as possible. In the search for solutions, it is important to respect the autonomy of universities and the academic freedom of researchers. Likewise, the other inequality factors at play should be recognized. These affect women, racialized people, Indigenous people and people with disabilities. Therefore, any intervention must consider the social relations in which multiple inequalities and injustices intersect and compound. In any case, these considerations should not diminish the urgency to act before the linguistic homogenization of some fields affects other disciplines, in the humanities and the arts, and before the increasing dominance of English in the dissemination of research and the recognition of scientific value exacerbate the inequalities outlined above.

Recommendations

Of the actions the federal government and the research funds under the responsibility of the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development could take, the FQPPU recommends the following:

- Significantly increase funding for French scholarly journals, through the research funds;
- Develop a fund to support French university presses and other knowledge dissemination activities;
- Invest in ways to increase the “discoverability” of scientific publications in French;
- Review the evaluation criteria used by research funds so that neither the place and language of publication nor the impact factor of journals are used as criteria that disadvantage French scientific publications;
- Invite research funds to take various measures to promote French-language research, such as prizes or awards for work published in French in each of the major research fields in Canada;
- Conduct a thorough review of the number of grant and scholarship applications submitted in French and the rate at which these applications are funded, compared with those submitted in English, in order to avoid any disparity in this regard;
- Task the Chief Scientist of Canada with leading a special committee to propose to the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development further concrete actions to increase scientific publication in French, the translation into French of the most important works published in English and the use of French scientific publications in teaching;
- Ensure stable funding to quickly implement the actions identified by the special committee; and
- Contribute to the development of international alliances to promote the dissemination of science in French and consider creating alliances to promote true scientific multilingualism.

About the FQPPU

The mission of the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU) is to work to preserve, defend, promote and develop universities as a public service and to advocate for accessible, high-quality universities. As a coordinating and democratic union body, the Federation is dedicated to defending and promoting the interests of its members and of the university as an institution. It addresses all issues affecting higher education and research, and the status and development of universities as a public service. Founded on May 16, 1991, the FQPPU includes 18 unions and associations representing more than 8,000 university professors in Quebec.



Since 1991, the FQPPU has been the forum for coordinating and representing Quebec's university professors.

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