

contradictions, is English-speaking. And, paradoxically, it doesn't know it. That is, it is not aware of the juxtaposition of English with other languages, nor the effect of this upon others, nor indeed the weakness of being able to operate only in English. North American English societies have had such a success at assimilating other languages, that they have developed almost a contempt for others. They are xenophobic without knowing it. Generally speaking, they have never had to trouble themselves with mastering other languages. North American society, and perhaps Australian society too, has assumed that other languages will defer to English. What, indeed, is the point of learning French, German, or Russian if one never hears them, if one never sees a Frenchman, German, or a Russian?

In this vast ocean of 250 million English, French is a beleaguered island, whose outer reefs are already flooded. Its centre is still strong, but it is very conscious of the tides of English that seem to swirl, ever higher, around it. Television is the dangerous crest of this tide. The following statistics are telling, and the only ones the reader need be inflicted with:



Samuel Saulnier fishing for an eel on the Bay of Bouctouche.

Photo: Roméo Cormier from Images de l'Acadie.

Language first spoken and still understood

	English	French
1961	58.5%	28.1%
1971	60.2%	26.9%
1976	61.4%	25.6%
1981	61.3%	25.7%

That was not the worst of it. The worst was that in Quebec itself, the very citadel of French, the proportion of French-speakers fell from 81.2% in 1961 to 80.0% in 1976. In fifteen years 1.2% is not a large drop, perhaps, but it was a very significant one. It was from demography as much as from nationalism that the Parti Quebecois, elected to power in 1976, affirmed the necessity of political separation from Canada. The Parti Quebecois argued that the French Canadians outside Quebec were going to be

lost to assimilation anyway; therefore, while there was still time, the Quebecois had to save themselves. One Quebec cabinet minister put it graphically. "Let us have the courage", she said "to escape together from our 'prison de la peur'." The prison of fear was the reason the Government of Quebec prepared a white paper in late 1979 proposing a referendum to allow Quebecois to decide whether they wanted Quebec to remain part of Canada or negotiate "Sovereignty Association". The referendum held in May 1980, posed the question:

"The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada based on the equality of nations:

"This agreement would enable Quebec to acquire this exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad — in other words, sovereignty — and at the same time to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency;

"No change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be affected without approval by the people through another referendum;

"On these terms do you give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada? Yes. No." The people of Quebec voted against the proposals 59.6% to 40.4%.

One reason for the weakening of the separatist argument in the last year or two is that the 1981 census showed that the number of French-speakers in Quebec had risen, from 80.0 in 1976 to 82.4%. That is probably the result of the language legislation that the Parti Quebecois government put in place in 1977.

English Canadian attitudes have not helped these Quebec fears much; they have if anything, exacerbated them. American ideas, for example, that assimilation is inevitable, "why not relax and enjoy it", have rubbed off on English Canadians, especially western ones. The English Canadian frontier with the Americans is the most permeable of frontiers. It is not defended by any language. English Canadians have not made any special efforts, not until very recently, to ease this French Canadian fear of losing one's very identity, nor have they made any special efforts, again until recently, to speak French.

There is, of course, a special problem for English Canadians in North America in learning languages, as doubtless it is for Australians. Not ever hearing another language slowly extinguishes one's capacity to recognize new sounds. For most people learning French, the problem is not only in the pronouncing and speaking of French, but especially in the hearing of it. One has to be able to hear the difference between *mélèze* (larch) and *malaise* (illness), or between *homme de fer*, a strong-willed man, and *homme d'affaires*, a businessman. The road to bilingualism is a hard road, as French Canadians have learned long ago. Most English Canadians don't know that. An Acadian pathologist in New Brunswick spent an extra year in high school because his English was bad, and another extra year at a French Canadian university because his French was. He did not object to doing it so much, but to the English Canadian assumption that bilingualism was easy. How it all came to be that way is a fascinating story.