

UVM ScholarWorks

Speakers of Languages Other than English as an Invisible Minority

Item Type	article
Authors	Arsenault, Patrick
Download date	2026-05-14 08:06:53
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/9685

Speakers of Languages Other than English as an Invisible Minority

Patrick Arsenault

Les établissements d'éducation postsecondaire aux États-Unis sont de plus en plus diversifiés. Bien que les écrits récents se penchent abondamment sur le rôle des minorités visibles et sur le rôle que leur expérience collégiale ou universitaire peut avoir sur le développement de leur identité et leur émancipation, il y a peu décrit qui traitent des minorités invisibles. Les locuteurs de langues autres que l'anglais vivent une certaine oppression dans le sens où il n'y a pas d'espace qui leur est dédié pour échanger et grandir dans leur langue. Parler d'autres langues peut même être vue comme une faiblesse. Ailleurs au monde, dont en Ontario, on constate des efforts appréciables et une prise de parole des minorités linguistiques pour garantir la création d'opportunités d'études et de recherche dans d'autres langues. Malheureusement, ces initiatives font souvent face à des embûches importantes. Cet article est un appel à tout étudiant.e, professeur.e ou professionnel.le qui maîtrise une autre langue. Je vous encourage à vivre et partager fièrement votre diversité linguistique.

American higher education institutions are becoming more diversified. While there are ample recent studies on the experiences of visible minorities and the impact their college or university experience can have in their identity development and emancipation, there is a lot less on invisible minorities. Speakers of languages other than English can feel oppressed, on campuses, because they have to leave an important part of themselves at the door. There are no spaces for them to exchange and grow in their language. Speaking other languages can even be seen as a weakness. Elsewhere in the world, including in Ontario, there are considerable efforts being made and individuals speaking up to guarantee the creation of learning and research opportunities in other languages. Unfortunately, these efforts are often met with great obstacles. This article is a call to action to any student, faculty, or staff who can speak other languages. I urge you to proudly live and share your linguistic diversity.

Patrick Arsenault holds a M.Ed in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri. He is currently a Ph.D. student in Governance and Policy in Education at Université Laval. He is also the Director of Advantage Ontario, a not-for-profit organization promoting opportunities to study in French in Ontario (Canada).

Language Identity and Invisible Minorities on College Campuses

American college campuses are more diverse than they have ever been. Specifically, visible minorities have seen steady growth in past decades. There are now more women than men enrolled in College in the United States (Hanson, 2021). There are now 2.1 million African American or Black students on campus, a 39.6% increase since 1976. Hispanic and Latine students now represent 19.5% of all students enrolled in a higher education institution in the United States. This represents a 441.7% growth since 1976 (Hanson, 2021). These changing demographics have propelled a range of studies on identity development in college and how minoritized students have been oppressed on campuses (Evans et al., 2010). However, less focus has been put on invisible minorities. These can be described as “groups of individuals who share a stigma that is not visually recognizable” (Schallenberger, 1991, p.326).

Students who belong to linguistic groups other than the English majority can fall within this category. In fact, Article 2 of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities states that:

“Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination” (UN 1982).

Yet, there is very little research on how college students who belong to a minority language groups navigate their campus experience. Most of the research that does exist grossly oversimplifies their experience by throwing them into a different category, namely “immigration status” or “race”. In addition, their experience is often depicted as something that needs remedial. For instance, there are conversations around support services for English as a Second Language (ESL) Students (Oropeza et al., 2010). Addressing linguistic diversity as something that has to be fixed leaves behind all students who are fluent enough in English to “pass” as native speakers, but also fails to recognize the special contributions they can bring to their campuses and classrooms. Of course, we should provide support to students who need to improve their level of English in order to succeed, but the conversation should not end there.

Research on campus diversity mostly comes from the United States and is anchored on its history. The civil rights movement of the 1960s sparked interest in Black identity development. In the 1970s, the women's movement and the gay rights movement gained momentum and encouraged research to look beyond straight men to include the perspectives of women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Evans et al., 2010). In recent years, concepts such as privilege, oppression, and multiple identities and intersectionality were looked at (Evans et al., 2010). According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), there are now over 21% of Americans not speaking English at home. As a result, it seems inevitable that linguistic minorities will start to draw more attention on campuses across the nation in years to come.

In this article, I will use the Canadian province of Ontario as a case study to demonstrate how higher education institutions can better support and celebrate students of linguistic minorities. I will also spend some time discussing the challenges that come with this special mission.

The Role of Language in Identity Building

Language is a clear identity marker (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1992). Wolfram (2008) went as far as saying that language rivaled religion, nationalism, and morality in terms of how people see and identify themselves. Lourdes (2008) argued that language is such a fundamental part of human identity that immigrant families should have the right to actively maintain their native language even after becoming fluent in the language of their host country. Language is so paramount to our identity, because it shapes how we understand the world we live in. In fact, identity can be defined as the product of diverse interactions experienced by an individual over the course of their life (Pilote & Joncas, 2021). People who speak more than one language have different personalities in each (Chen & Bond, 2010). Regier and his colleagues (2016) looked at how vocabulary could shift from one language to the other. For instance, Innu dialects may not have a word for kangaroo. On the other hand, they could have a plethora of words for ice and snow, which other languages can amalgamate into one. Another good example is the French word “fleuve” which means a river that ends in the ocean. There is no such word in English. A river simply is a river. Not having access to the same terms to communicate impacts who we are at a deep level and how we interact with others.

Languages are a complex part of who we are and they go beyond vocabulary and methods of expression. Language is intertwined with social, cultural,

and political realities of their speakers (Pilote & Joncas, 2021). In Belgium, language has been identified at the core of national identities. As such, the country established three distinct linguistic federations (French, German, Flemish) that have executive powers. This political move ensures fair representation of the different linguistic groups in the country and create a rich, diverse, and heterogeneous society. I would like to highlight how the following quote from the Belgian government uses the word “obviously” (italized) to explain how the different linguistic groups have self-governance in a wide range of contexts, including higher education and scientific research.

“Since the Communities are based on the concept of “language” and language is “dependent on the individual”, a number of other powers are obviously [emphasize added] associated with the Communities. The Community has powers for culture (theatre, libraries, audiovisual media, etc.), education, the use of languages and matters relating to the individual which concern on the one hand health policy (curative and preventive medicine) and on the other hand assistance to individuals (protection of youth, social welfare, aid to families, immigrant assistance services, etc.) They also have powers in the field of scientific research in relation to their powers and international relations associated with their powers” (Belgian Federal Government, 2021).

While language is not often associated with identity in the United States, it is in many other parts of the world. The United States is home to sizeable linguistic minorities, including French speakers in Louisiana, Maine and New York, as well as Spanish speakers in border states and around the country (Cultural Services French Embassy in the United States, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2017). As aforementioned, more than one out of five individuals living in the United States uses a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau, 2020). It is interesting to note that English does not enjoy the status of official language for the United States (Kaur, 2018). This reiterates the notion that Americans perhaps see language less as part of their identity.

Language Minorities on Canadian and American Campuses

Ontario is Canada’s most populated province with close to 15 million inhabitants. Of these, less than 5% use French as their first language. Yet, the

province is home to 11 postsecondary education institutions that are either entirely French-speaking or bilingual. This can be explained, because Canada has two official languages and each language enjoys special protections when in a minority context. At the federal level, Section 23 of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms specifically protects minority language educational rights. While this does not apply to postsecondary education, it provides a pipeline through immersion, bilingual, French-speaking, and English-speaking schools in the K-12 system nationwide (Páez Silva, 2019). In Ontario specifically, the French Services Act guarantees that French and English are both to be treated as joint official languages in courts and education at all levels. Because of this act, there is special funding available for French and bilingual colleges and universities in the province. These were put in place to preserve the language, culture, and identity of Franco-Ontarians (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2021).

French-speaking and bilingual postsecondary institutions initially provided access to higher education to pockets of population that could not otherwise. This could be because they did not speak English or did not feel comfortable joining an English-speaking environment, because of societal tensions between the English majority and the French minority. French and bilingual campuses in Ontario have a special social responsibility to cater to populations that have historically been kept out of postsecondary education through systemic barriers. Something that stands out is that these oppressed groups tend to be invisible, as language is not necessarily something that can be seen unlike other ways people are victims of discrimination.

On the other side of the border, the U.S. Department of Education protects students from discrimination based on race and national origin, age, and sex (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). However, there is no mention of minority languages and there are no special accommodations or laws to ensure access to education in languages other than English. While there are no colleges or universities that operate in a language other than English in the United States, there is a solid pipeline of K-12 students that either attend dual language or immersion schools (2,000 schools) or are learning English as a second language in a public school (5 million students around the U.S. with California being close to 20%) (Gross, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Breaking Down Barriers in Minority Language Higher Education

While language diversity is acknowledged in Ontario and the French-speaking minority has been able to secure rights over time, it has not been an easy process. In addition, the progress that has been made can easily be lost.

In 2018, the government of Ontario tried to cut his Office of Francophone affairs to save money, but was met my stark opposition (Rieti, 2018). There are often complaints from the English majority that certain jobs require to be bilingual and are not accessible to them as a result. Many see Francophone or bilingual colleges or universities as a threat, because they teach high-demand skills they do not possess themselves. In 2012, there was an uproar in a community with a significant number of French speakers, because a hospital required employees to speak French, so that they could serve patients from the minority language community (Graffin, 2012). Based on government changes, any advances can be put in jeopardy. For example, the Université de l'Ontario français was several years in the making when it was cancelled. It was the first publicly-funded autonomous French-speaking university for French speakers by French speakers in Ontario. This decision brought uproar and the government was forced to reconsider and re-launch the project two years later (Pelletier, 2021).

In the last year, Laurentian University, a bilingual university in the North of Ontario faced a major financial crisis that made national news. To stay afloat, it cut 30% of its program, most of them being in French. It also cut ties with the University of Sudbury which was a federated university that was in the process of transitioning from a bilingual institution to a Francophone institution. This resulted in the University of Sudbury having to shut down and close all of its programs. It had to let go of all of its students and most of its staff while it is trying to secure alternative funding in hopes to be revived in the future (Campbell, 2021).

As Francophone communities have a low demographic weight in Ontario, French-speaking and bilingual institutions rely on international students to keep their doors open. Some campuses have as many as 60% of their student body come from outside of Canada. At the end of the day, international students in Ontario that speak French still represent about 2% of the total of international students (Government of Ontario, 2020). As such, it can be difficult to advocate for more funds or resources. Existing is a constant battle.

In the past year a taskforce on the state of French language postsecondary education in minority contexts in Canada was launched. Its goal is to see campuses governed by French speakers and for French speakers go beyond allowing the language and culture to survive, but making sure it thrives. The taskforce noted that there was a call to expand minority educational rights to postsecondary in the Canadian Constitution back in 2005, but there has been no such change (États généraux. *Le postsecondaire en contexte francophone minoritaire*, 2021; Lalonde & Lortie, 2014).

Finally, postsecondary institutions do not act alone. They collaborate with a complex ecosystem of community organizations to safeguard the French culture and language in Ontario. They have had to show ingenuity and share resources as well as best practices to survive. For example, the Association francophone pour le savoir just launched a new chapter in Toronto to promote research and collaborations in French across all postsecondary institutions in the region. In addition, Avantage Ontario was created in 2013 to assist French-speaking and bilingual institutions in recruiting students outside of Canada. (États généraux. *Le postsecondaire en contexte francophone minoritaire*, 2021).

Embracing Language Diversity on Campuses

Wolfram (2008) argued that there has never been a time where issues of language diversity, and especially loss of languages have been more evident. There is immense untapped potential in the United States. By adding a language diversity layer to college education and embracing minority languages, we could improve educational opportunities and experiences for all. Research shows that evolving in bilingual environments is good for brain development and cognitive growth. It allows us to have better attention and also the ability to switch between tasks effectively (Marian & Shook, 2012). It also promotes better empathy, literacy skills (in all spoken languages), academic performance and engagement, a greater understanding of diversity, and it can help prevent dementia and other cognitive issues (Kamenetz, 2016). What is even better is that it is still possible to learn a foreign language as an adult, so college students could still greatly benefit from initiatives promoting linguistic diversity even if they only speak English (Hartshorne et al., 2018).

Just like in Ontario, the changes that are needed to liberate and celebrate speakers of minority languages on American campuses will not happen

overnight or without support from many stakeholders from community organizations, to faculty, student groups, and student affairs professionals. The first step could be increasing visibility and creating spaces and moments for people to exist and thrive in languages others than English. Why not encourage faculty and staff to identify what languages they speak on their office door? Why not create partnerships to offer online classes through international partners that students could take in various languages during their studies? Perhaps students could submit a chapter of their thesis in a foreign language (like it is common to submit a chapter in English in a thesis in a different language). There are so many ways to incorporate other languages into the curriculum and normalize multilingual functioning.

I think it can be easy for scholars who have spoken English all their lives to simply accept the fact that higher education and research mostly happen in English in the United States and across the world. This quote helps me envision what American campuses could look like if they capitalized on linguistic diversity, instead of “mitigating” it.

“I moved to the USA in 2004 and didn’t speak English very well. After six years, I decided to go back to school. But all universities I applied to rejected me because I had a gap and bad English. So, I went to a community college and then applied to my first choice university again and got in [this time]. I was rejected but I didn’t give up and tried again. At university, I did very well. Won awards for my leadership at school and well-respected among peers. At graduation, I was the class valedictorian where I gave a speech in English to 3,000 people talking about my gap years, rejection and resilience. The school that rejected me for these weaknesses was now celebrating them! It was a full circle for me and everyone who supported me in this journey” (Khalid, 2021).

In this example, the student persevered and was able to prove to her peers that speaking a language other than English did not have to be a weakness. There are thousands of stories just like this one.

References

- Belgian Federal Government. (2021). *The powers of the communities*. Official Information and Services. https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/communities/competence
- Blommaert, J., & Verschueren, J. (1992). The role of language in European nationalist ideologies. *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 2(3), 355–375. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.2.3.13blo>
- Campbell, I. (2021). “*It’s a betrayal*” says Sudbury Franco-Ontarian community of cuts at Laurentian University. CTV Northern Ontario. <https://northernontario.ctvnews.ca/it-s-a-betrayal-says-sudbury-franco-ontarian-community-of-cuts-at-laurentian-university-1.5393947>
- Chen, S. X., & Bond, M. H. (2010). Two languages, two personalities? examining language effects on the expression of personality in a bilingual context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(11), 1514–1528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210385360>
- Cultural Services French Embassy in the United States. (2020). *French-speaking population in the US*. K-12 Education. <https://frenchlanguagek12.org/11024-french-speaking-population-us>
- États généraux. Le postsecondaire en contexte francophone minoritaire. (2021). Documentation. <https://egpostsecondaire.ca/documentation/>
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student Development in College* (2nd ed.).
- Government of Ontario. (2020). 2020-2025 *Strategic Mandate Agreement: Université de Hearst*. Postsecondary Education. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2020-2025-strategic-mandate-agreement-universite-dehearst>
- Graffin, K. (2012). *Council stops funding hospital over language policy*. CTV News. <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/council-stops-funding-hospital-over-language-policy-1.782485>
- Gross, N. (2016). *Dual-language programs on the rise across the U.S.* <https://www.ewa.org/blog-latino-ed-beat/dual-language-programs-rise-across-us>
- Hanson, M. (2021). *College enrollment & student demographic statistics*. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>

- Hartshorne, J. K., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Pinker, S. (2018). A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. *Cognition*, 177(July 2016), 263–277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.04.007>
- Kamenetz, A. (2016). *6 Potential brain benefits of bilingual education*. NPRed. <https://www.npr.org/sectioned/2016/11/29/497943749/6-potential-brain-benefits-of-bilingual-education>
- Kaur, H. (2018). *FYI: English isn't the official language of the United States*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/20/us/english-us-official-language-trnd/index.html>
- Khalid, S. (2021). No Title. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CVkJObbyptAR/>
- Lalonde, A., & Lortie, L. (2014). *Éducation postsecondaire de langue française*. http://rccfc.ca/pdf/recension_EPSLF_2014.pdf
- Lourdes, C. R. (2008). The relationship between language and identity. The use of the home language as a human right of the immigrant. *REM-HU - Revista Interdisciplinar Da Mobilidade Humana*, 16(31), 63–81.
- Marian, V., & Shook, A. (2012). *The cognitive benefits of being bilingual*. Cerebrum. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *English language learners in public schools*. Annual Reports and Information Staff (Annual Reports). <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf>
- Oropeza, M. V., Varghese, M. M., & Kanno, Y. (2010). Linguistic minority students in higher education: Using, resisting, and negotiating multiple labels. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 43(2), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665681003666304>
- Páez Silva, A. A. (2019). *The French Language in Ontario, 2001 to 2016: Facts and Figures*. Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Thematic Series. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019012-eng.htm>
- Pelletier, E. (2021). *L'Université de l'Ontario français sera enfin inaugurée*. Le Droit. <https://www.ledroit.com/2021/11/11/luniversite-de-lontario-francais-sera-enfin-inauguree-8812c2c4b67eb237ddf31f3465b1d70c>
- Pilote, A., & Joncas, J. (2021). *Linguistic Minorities and Society La construction identitaire linguistique et culturelle durant un programme universitaire d'éducation en français en milieu minoritaire Le cas de cinq étudiants fransaskois Minorités linguistiques et société La construct*.

- Queen's Printer for Ontario. (2021). French Language Services Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. F.32. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90f32>
- Regier, T., Carstensen, A., & Kemp, C. (2016). Languages Support Efficient Communication about the Environment: Words for Snow Revisited. *PLoS ONE*, *11*(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0151138>
- Rieti, J. (2018). *Ford government backtracks on some cuts affecting Ontario francophones*. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/doug-ford-francophone-cuts-1.4919026>
- Schallenberger, D. (1991). Invisible Minorities: Coming out of the Classroom Closet. *Journal of Management Education*, *15*(3), 325–334.
- United States Census Bureau. (2017). *Facts for Features: Hispanic Heritage Month 2017*. Facts for Features. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/hispanic-heritage.html>
- United States Census Bureau. (2020). Quick Facts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/faaact/table/US/RHI725219>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Protecting Students Overview. Office for Civil Rights. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/front-page/pro-students/protectingstudents.html>
- Wolfram, W. (2008). Language Diversity and the Public Interest. In K. A. King, N. S. Estes, L. E. Fogle, J. J. Lou, & B. Soukuo (Eds.), *Sustaining Linguistic Diversity* (pp. 187–202). <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.13067>