

Linguistic Purism and Language Planning in Iceland, Quebec, and Malta

Theodore Eicher 261255899

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1. Introduction

In this essay I examine efforts to preserve Icelandic, French, and Maltese in Iceland, Quebec, and Malta respectively—three linguistic islands that face varying degrees of English ‘infiltration’ and that have each responded in different ways. Results have been mixed, and largely depend on the nature of the policies implemented, the specifics of the language of concern, and public perception. Policies of corpus planning can quickly and effectively penetrate everyday speech if done right, while policies of status and acquisition planning generally attempt to sway unstoppable forces of linguistic and cultural mixing. Nevertheless, in all cases, language planning has consequences in all walks of life, especially on how people use and think of language in each of these societies.

2. Background and previous research

Iceland’s linguistic setting is fairly straightforward, although my intention not to minimize meaningful variation and change in the Icelandic language should be emphasized. The country is constitutionally monolingual with relatively little regional variation, and the language has remained very conservative compared to its relatives—that is, modern Icelandic resembles Old Norse rather closely. Iceland’s geographical isolation has not, however, protected its linguistic purity. The 17th century saw Icelanders attempt to distance their language from Danish, which was at the time spoken in Iceland by the internationally connected upper class. Later, English became a more common source of loanwords, especially during and after World War II (Spolsky 2004:62).

The Icelandic Language Council was created in 1964 following the efforts of scientific fields to 'Icelandicize' foreign words, a common characteristic of Icelandic language policy that can still be observed in more recent changes. Holmarsdottir (2001:387–388) gives several examples, my favorite of which is probably the Icelandic word for “software,” *hugbúnaður*, a portmanteau of *hugur* (“thought”) and *búnaður* (“equipment”). Although most Icelanders also speak English, there is a strong sense of pride around the Icelandic language, and the government’s efforts to protect it are popular. As another example, in 1998, Microsoft was persuaded by the Icelandic government to translate the Windows operating system into Icelandic (Holmarsdottir (2001:390), despite the target population of less than 300,000 nearly all additionally speaking English. Iceland has broadly succeeded in ‘protecting’ its language, both from foreign vocabulary and from elimination, but it has shown that such results require continued interest and action.

As most Canadians will be able to tell you, Quebec has a rather turbulent history with regards to language planning. Until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the province vaguely overlapped with most of the French-speaking population in Canada, a population that was largely marginalized and forced to be bilingual by the dominance of English in business and advertising (Bourhis & Landry 2002:108). Nationalist public sentiment led to the passage of bills 22 and 101 in the 1970s, which quickly repositioned provincial policy in favor of preserving French only. This had a symbolic effect on Quebec’s borders; rather than being simply

administrative, they were now more directly linguistic, a trend further strengthened by a large anglophone population leaving the province (Spolsky 2004:196).

Language planning remains a prominent part of Quebec politics: policies like Bill 101 and its 2022 revamp, Bill 96, are popular among the Francophone majority. Many recent English loanwords used in France have been rejected in favor of domestically coined replacements, much like in Iceland. A strong sense of nationalism, combined with the deeply bilingual colonial history of Quebec, have extended these debates into the present day. Spolsky (2004:196) argues that both main linguistic groups view themselves as a minority—Anglophones in a Francophone province, Francophones on an Anglophone continent—a central conflict that has long defined Quebec politics, and notably, has ignored both the indigenous and immigrant linguistic groups that get caught in the crossfire.

It is also important to note that the popular criticism of Quebec's language laws often ignores the real societal change that has occurred as a result. I believe it is fair to say that when the first laws were introduced, English was *too* present in Quebec—it dominated advertising and finance despite being spoken by a small minority, and many English schools were not adequately preparing children for the many opportunities available only in French. Bill 101 strengthened French-language education, made it easier for immigrants to integrate, and brought the corporate world more in line with the general public (Bourhis & Landry 2002:126-127). While this bill was the first installation in the gradual reduction of Anglophone autonomy, it meant a lot to the Francophone majority. This exposes a major problem faced by

Quebec and not by Iceland—the need to provide for, or the consequences of neglecting, a linguistic minority—one piece of the puzzle that explains why Quebec’s language law debate has been so heated for so many years.

I knew almost nothing about the Maltese language before starting this research, yet it has surprised me, having turned out to be a seriously interesting and unique case study. Unlike Quebec, Iceland, and indeed most linguistic islands, Malta has experienced three, arguably four, distinct waves of linguistic influence. The first inhabitants of Malta to speak a documented language were probably the Phoenicians, but very little is known about this period; starting with the period of Arab rule from 870 to 1091 CE, a distinct Maltese language began to develop as part of the Sicilian strain of Arabic, drifting apart from North African variants due to geographical isolation.

The Middle Ages saw a highly mixed and changing linguistic environment in Malta. Siculo-Arabic evolved, taking on a large amount of Latin-based vocabulary rather than being eradicated as it was in Sicily. The first concrete textual examples of Maltese, dating back to the late 15th century, use almost entirely Arabic vocabulary; however, it is believed that most local and informal matters were communicated in a “pan-Sicilian koiné” (Brincat 2000:156) and that this text demonstrates diglossia—surviving early texts in Maltese are mostly literary and poetic, where purism was a high concern and Latin words were avoided.

The period of British colonization of Malta introduced English, and a new complication over national identity, to the linguistic debate. Colonial administrators hoped to replace

Italian—the dominant language, considered too closely tied to the Catholic Church—with English, but seeing that these efforts broadly failed to gain traction, focus was turned towards promoting the Maltese language and its Arabic roots. While not the first example of language purism, this was the first true implementation of top-down language planning in Malta. It came into effect first through the introduction of Arabic words back into Maltese-language schooling, and infiltrated some, but not all, parts of higher society: notable 20th-century Maltese writers Dun Karm Psaila and Ġużè Aquilina wrote prose and poetry with many archaic Semitic words in place of more common Romance counterparts, while these same authors did not hesitate to use Latin-based vocabulary in their scientific works (Brincat 2000:156–158).

In observing other periods, we continue to see that the linguistic environment of Malta has been almost continuously multi-influential for centuries. While the Maltese language is considered part of the Semitic family, less than one third of its modern lexicon derives from Arabic (Brincat 2000:163), a relationship that appears a lot like the one between English and the Germanic family. Most of the remaining vocabulary comes from Italian, as discussed, but a growing portion comes from English, which was established as the secondary language of Malta at its independence in 1964. Since then, the education system has been thoroughly bilingual, with almost everyone speaking both languages, and students and teachers alike employing degrees of code switching and mixing. Yet, language policy is largely absent from politics in Malta today, despite the inherent impurity of the Maltese language and the almost Montreal-like bilingual environment. Brincat and Frendo (1994) agree that there is little to no worry of English

'taking over' local affairs as there is in Quebec or Iceland. As a possible explanation, Frenco (1994:21) gestures towards a notion of past linguistic survival: that the Maltese language has already survived cultural conquest by two European powers, fostering a form of linguistic nationalism that encourages parents to pass on the language.

3. Discussion

Malta's stable bilingualism and Iceland's nationalist purism do contrast with each other, but more so with Quebec's perpetual language struggle. It has proven extremely difficult to force people to speak a language that they do not see as theirs. But exactly what processes determine how united a population is on these issues? Given Malta's history, it could have become home to three different languages; why are the Maltese people so much more content than Quebecers with the presence of English?

Spolsky's argument that both linguistic groups see themselves as a minority is a plausible one. The Anglophone community in the province of Quebec, most notably in Montreal, has historically held much of the political and economic power. Spolsky contrasts this situation with the Catalan language, whose sole claim to Catalonia is much more grounded than that of French in Quebec. The comparison to Malta is similar. Although Malta has been colonized multiple times, these waves of influence came successively, allowing speech communities to adapt and re-unify over several generations.

To an extent, this has happened in Quebec as well. While English loanwords since the era of language laws (that is, the 1970s) have been largely rejected, Quebec French is full of

older anglicisms that have infiltrated the language over the previous centuries. De Gorog (1965) documents English influence on syntax and grammar in colloquial Quebec French, well before the passage of Bill 22, demonstrating a real degree of language mixing. However, the incorporation of English into Quebec French was not universally well-received, especially by academics. This conflict is what has made the development of Quebec French so much more turbulent than that of Maltese. Francophones see the North American Anglophone majority as a threat to their language, both from the outside—the rest of Canada—and the inside, in the form of Anglophone communities in Montreal and elsewhere. Malta and Iceland are small enough to be linguistically uniform, and their geographic isolation keeps them insulated.

This line of reasoning presents a possible argument for the independence movement in Quebec. The Mouvement Québec indépendant argues that Bill 96 actually falls short of what is necessary to preserve the French language and to overcome the “culture of resignation” to English dominance (MQI 2021), particularly because it allows for children and immigrants to navigate life in Quebec without learning French thanks to a number of federal bilingual institutions. Indeed, an independent Quebec would be free to operate all of its services exclusively in French, and this would absolutely be more successful in securing the interests of Bill 96.

However, I'd like to call back to the examples of Malta and Iceland to explain why this logic is flawed. Quebec may not have hard borders, but neither do Malta and Iceland—both are part of the border-free Schengen area, and are culturally and economically close to mainland

Europe. These islands show that widespread bilingualism is not necessarily a threat to the survival of a minority language. The Quebec government has frequently pointed to the “Bonjour hi” of Montreal as a negative influence. Is it reasonable to eliminate the English from a greeting that has always stood only for bilingualism? If the past and present nationalist provincial governments of Quebec have understood that bilingualism is not an inherent threat, it is certainly worth questioning the ends of its language laws—keeping the French language alive, or promoting a more homogeneous society? There are absolutely different goals in mind from those held by the Icelandic Language Council or the Maltese government, even in its post-independence nation-building era.

Returning to language planning, I believe that a distinction must also be made between the types of language planning implemented in these territories. Corpus planning refers to specific forms within a language, and includes the neologisms in Icelandic and Québécois. As discussed, these words are a source of pride for Icelanders, and Quebec has not faced difficulty encouraging their use: *courriel* and *divulgâcher* are used without hesitation, and the former has even spread to France. Spolsky (2004:60) writes that corpus planning is normally practiced by monolingual nations, like Iceland and Quebec,¹ as well as multilingual ones such as India. The government of Quebec has also, however, engaged in two other forms of language planning: status planning, concerning the domains in which a code is used, and acquisition planning,

¹ Spolsky refers only to *constitutionally* monolingual countries, of which Iceland and Quebec are both examples, even though English is prominent in both. This is because government policy typically defends only the official language(s) of the nation. Also, because provinces of Canada define their own official languages, Quebec can effectively be considered a country in this case.

concerning education. This is what sets Quebec apart from the other cases I have examined, as neither Iceland nor Malta currently seeks to fundamentally change where in their societies English is used.

All three nations share a strong sense of nationalism—a willingness, and often a desire, to pass on the language to the next generation. But Quebec differentiates itself once more with a relatively protective form of nationalism that has often manifested as anti-immigrant sentiment, especially in the 21st century. Given that Quebec is seen as a desirable destination for an increasing number of non-Francophone migrants, and the fact that immigration is officially a federal matter, it is understandable that the government is seeking to linguistically integrate as many people as possible. This compounds the English–French linguistic battle and makes it harder for the government’s language policy to work for everyone. Immigration and integration is somewhat outside of the scope of this paper, but I would be curious to see if other countries with proactively self-protective linguistic minorities have faced similar problems.

4. Conclusion

Quebec, Iceland, and Malta each have a unique story of language planning. Quebec, mainly in the past 60 years, has attempted to assert its Francophone identity over English, Indigenous languages, and immigrant languages through an aggressive policy covering all aspects of language planning. Iceland remains almost entirely bilingual while pursuing a highly purist form of the Icelandic language through coinage of new terms using parts of existing words. In Malta, past attempts at language planning have defined the diglossic domains of different types of

vocabulary, eventually fading away as the Italian and Arabic lexicons merged together into a mosaic-like Maltese language used today in extensive code-switching with English.

Looking only through a lens of success and failure, Iceland seems to have done the most in opposing natural 'de-purifying' changes like the adoption of anglicisms, but the reality is more complicated: Quebec's objectives in language planning are by far the most ambitious. The policies attempt not only to sustain Quebec French, but to expand its usage; to redefine it as the high code everywhere in the province. Maltese is lexically very impure, but the degree to which the Maltese people embrace their bilingualism is admirable, and could be a model for a less interventionist Quebec government sometime in the future.

Selecting these particular areas of study was more arbitrary than I might like to admit. During the process, I also considered researching the many minority languages of France, which have historically been repressed by the French central government; many were driven to extinction. More recently, though, regional attention is gradually being turned back towards languages like Breton, Gallo, and Occitan, and I think it would be worthwhile to study how revitalization efforts are interacting with the national dominance of French and the cultivation of regional identities.

This paper also neglects to explore how language planning works in multilingual societies, where the state does not actively promote one or two languages over others. Are immigrants afforded more freedom in a multilingual country like India than in one like Canada, or does a unifying official language offer an easier pathway to the desired degree of integration?

Whether or not language planning is deemed successful, it reflects the will of a society to keep its language alive, in whatever sense they may take that concept, and it affects every speaker's concept of communication. It is a powerful tool. It should never be misused, but at the same time, the world will probably never agree on what constitutes a good example of language planning.

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