

Pis, t'aimes-tu mon char? Si t'as frette, dis-moi-lé.. gêne-toi pas!

Québec French 101

Being a French prof, I have a great passion for my native language, but after over nine years of helping students get closer to fluency, I've noticed a lot of *tendencies* and *myths* in my classes, especially when it comes to the French spoken in Québec. I hope that this article helps to dispel the myths associated with Québec French and to provide you with a *crash course* in learning (or starting to learn) the differences between Québec French and Parisian French.

First of all, why did I just write *Parisian* French? Why didn't I write *standard* French or *French* French? Well, I'll deal with that in a moment.

Before we dive into the differences between the French spoken on this side of the Atlantic and the one spoken in Paris, let's go through a brief (well, I'll try to keep it brief, but you know me...) overview of the history of French in Québec.

Le passé

1534 - This is when it all began! Jacques Cartier sailed over from France and planted a big old cross in the ground, shouting something about claiming this land for the king of France. La Nouvelle-France (New France) is born.

1608 - Every territory needs a capital, eh? Samuel de Champlain founds Québec (Québec City, in English... in French, we rarely say «Ville de Québec», unless we're talking about the naval ship that has that name). Soon after, Trois-Rivières, Montréal and all sorts of other cities are founded.

1608 - 1759 - Everything is going along wonderfully, until the English decide that they want all of North America (Ok, I'm really over-simplifying things, but oh well.), and Nouvelle-France is conquered by the British.

1760 - The French give up Nouvelle-France, while fighting to keep Saint Pierre et Miquelon (because of the abundant amounts of cod that were swimming around). Good move.... France ends up with two tiny islands whose inhabitants are mostly on E.I. (or the French equivalent of E.I.), while Québec blossoms into eight million people! Bon travail, les Français!

1867 until now - Québec joins confederation. Canada is formed. A lot of things happened - some good, a lot of not-so-good. Blah blah... and now we're at the present day! (My most sincere apologies to those interested in modern Canadian history! I summed up over a 100 years with «blah blah»!)

Ok, political history over. Now, why is Québec French different from Parisian French? Well, here are some facts:

1. The vast majority of the male colonists who came over to New France were from the northwest of France (Normandie, Poitou, Bretagne). The majority of the women were from the Paris region (or regions nearby).
2. During the 1600's and 1700's, the vast majority of people in France didn't speak French, at all (surprise, surprise!). *French* was spoken mostly in the Paris region, by the upper classes, being one of many Latin-derived languages spoken all the way from Portugal to Romania (a legacy of the Roman empire, over 1500 years ago). In France alone, dozens of regional romance languages were spoken - French just being one of those languages. The only advantage that French had was that it was spoken by the royal family and the aristocracy in Paris - the capital - thus giving it royal prestige and making it the language of administration in France (even though the majority of the population couldn't speak it).
3. The men who came over from France spoke their own romance languages (Norman, Gallo, Poitevin, Saintongeais, etc), which were all quite similar to French (just as any Romance languages are similar to French) but still languages in their own right. Some of the colonists could speak

French, with varying degrees of fluency. Imagine going to a new world, to build a colony. That takes enormous amounts of cooperation. In order to accomplish this, people have to have some sort of common language. The colonists had to speak one language, in order to survive. Of course, they all chose the most prestigious language of their country, and of the period, French. Don't forget - French was **the** international language of diplomacy, commerce, art and culture of the age - it was the logical choice.

4. The colonists needed women, other than the nuns that came over with them. Imagine thousands of men wandering around the woods, with no women in sight, other than a bunch of nuns - not really the best recipe for populating a colony. The king sent over thousands of women, most of whom were impoverished noblewomen or orphans. These were the *filles du roi*. Remember, most of them came from Paris. They spoke French.

5. Think about how a child learns their native language? It's usually from their parents, especially the mother (i.e. *mother tongue*). Within one generation, New France became totally French-speaking. This isn't really anything to scoff at - France wouldn't truly achieve this until after the First World War! The United States wouldn't become fully English-speaking until the same period - until the early 1900's, German was a close second to English as the most common language spoken in the British colonies that turned into the United States. In the south-western part of what would become the U.S., Spanish was the language of the vast majority. In Nova Scotia, Gaelic was the most predominate language from Truro up to Sydney.

6. We also have to remember that the French spoken during this period was not identical to the French spoken today. Languages evolve and change. Go read some texts in English from the 17th century - they are full of words, expressions and grammar that are not used anymore in today's language. You have to also keep in mind that even though New France became entirely francophone, the old languages of the earliest colonists (Normand, Poitevin, Gallo, and others) left some traces, especially in the vocabulary of the French spoken in New France.

7. French tourists from the 17th and 18th centuries were astonished to find a homogenous francophone population in New France. Many wrote home about how amazingly well the people spoke and wrote in New France, saying that in terms of quality, the New French could rival anyone in Paris.

8. After New France was conquered by the British, French remained the most dominant language, but virtually all ties between France and New France, or Canada - as it came to be known - were cut. Not too long after the conquest, the French revolted and overthrew their monarchy. After the French revolution, whose main goal was to give the middle and lower classes more authority and power in France, the linguistic standard in France shifted. Gone were the days when royal and aristocratic French were in fashion. Middle class and lower middle class speech became the new norm. This new norm, with a different accent (think of the accent differences between social classes in Britain today. Imagine the Queen's English stripped of it's status as the *proper* way to talk in the UK, and lower class accents becoming the standard), became the new standard of France. Québec's French was almost untouched by this shift, due to the severing of the ties between it and France.

9. Québec French and Parisian French evolved for over 100 years without having much contact with one another. Languages don't usually evolve in great leaps and bounds in 100 years, but differences definitely do arise, especially when the standard forms of both varieties are rooted in two different ways of speaking (royal French vs. middle-lower class French).

An interesting aside: many actors in France who perform 17th or 18th century Molière plays (a bit like the English equivalent of Shakesperian actors) study how the Québécois speak French, and imitate their accent, in order to reproduce an accent that would be used in the plays from that era.

10. It's only been since the mid 20th century that Parisian French and Québec French have had a lot of close contact. Both varieties influence each other nowadays - Québec actors and singers are very popular in France, and everyone in Québec has access to European French media and culture.

So, if you think about it, Québec French is a descendant of Classical French, the French spoken by kings and the nobility. It's the French that was spoken and written by the great literary giants of the period. It's a fact that while many students of literature in France often need a small glossary to understand some of the words in the great works of the period (15th - 18th century), whereas Québec students can often read these works with

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great ease - they see hundreds of examples of their own daily vocabulary in these literary masterpieces!

Now let's tackle some of the myths that abound about Québec French.

Les mythes

Québec French isn't *real French*.

I need a shot of whisky every time I hear that. Just re-read all the historical info in the previous pages. If Québec French isn't *real* French, well, Canadian English isn't *real* English. American English isn't *real*, and who can even describe what Australians speak! In the entire Anglophone world, the only people who would speak *real* English would be news-readers on the BBC (they are the ones who are trained to speak in *Received pronunciation*, the standard form of English in the U.K.), about .000000001% of the population!

Québeckers speak a *dialect* of French.

Linguists define dialects as regional sub-categories of languages, having a very different phonetic system, a very different vocabulary and a very different grammar. Yes, Québec French has differences from Parisian French, but not anywhere near enough to be classified as a dialect. Look at this example:

Ah, tu aïs féimme, min tchiot garchun? Vâ t'asséir à tab pi sarve-ti eïn tchiot péiu à meingère!

Do you understand any of that? This is a real dialect of French, spoken in north-central France. How would a Parisian translate this dialect into their French? Like this:

Ah, tu as faim, mon petit garçon? Va t'asseoir à la table et mange un peu.

How would a Québecker translate this dialect into Québec French? Let's see:

Ah, tu as faim, mon petit garçon? Va t'asseoir à la table et mange un peu.

It doesn't seem like Québec French is a dialect. Accent differences do not make a dialect!

Québec French is nothing but slang!

What does this even mean? Without slang, no language or language variety can even exist! Slang words are just other, more informal ways of saying things. Yes, Québec French has a lot of slang. So does Parisian French. So does Belgian French. So does French spoken in southern France. So does every single variety of French, English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Mongolian, Thai or any language for that matter. I'm often quite taken aback by this myth - it means nothing!

Québec French is chock full of English words. Look, they all say «checker!»

Oh please! And English isn't chock full of French words? Over 50% of English's vocabulary is directly derived from French. And, the French use many anglicisms in their speech. The Japanese do. Koreans do. Turks do. Mexicans do. Russians do. Given the fact that American pop culture has spread all over the world, English has peppered almost every language with a few of its words. Does Québec French use more anglicisms than Parisian French? Nope. It's just that the English words that have been adopted into Québec French are often not the same words that the French have adopted. Just because a language variety has adopted some words from English does not mean it's anglicized. Remember... French has hundreds of thousands of words and terms. One hundred English words is only a tiny percent of the entire language. According to most linguistic studies, Québec French employs about a 150 very frequent and commonly used anglicisms, out of a French vocabulary of about 300 000 words and expressions. And we cannot forget that according to the same reliable studies, the French use more anglicisms than the Québécois!

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Québeckers say weird things, like «ché» for «je sais» and «chuis» for «je suis», and «y a» for «il y a».

Yes they do! They do all the time - but so do most of the other 200 million Francophones all over the world. The majority of French speakers speak like this in their everyday speech. Just because your textbooks don't teach you this does not mean it doesn't exist! Think about someone learning English. They may go through years of learning English without ever learning that many Anglophones would say things like «*Yeah, I'm gonna go **shoppin** later on but I **gotta** stop by the bank first to get some money*», instead of «Yes, I am going to go shopping later, but I have to stop by the bank first to withdraw some money». Languages all have their formal and informal varieties.

Québeckers speak SO fast!

Actually, the French speak faster than we do. It is often said that Swiss francophones speak the slowest in the Francophone world.

Why even bother with French? All Québeckers speak English anyway! On my last trip to Montréal, everyone spoke to me in English!

Well, the true facts (I'm quoting Stats Canada here) are that only 35% of francophone Québeckers (who make up 80% of the population) speak English, and that means *any* English, from just a smattering to full on fluency. Now, where do the vast majority of those bilinguals live? In Montréal. Next time you're in Québec, venture outside of Montréal and the touristy parts of Québec City.... English gets hard to find.

Québec French has no influence on the world. I mean, who, outside of Québec, even knows anything about Québec French?

Well, it might be surprising, but a mere 8 million people can have a pretty big impact on the world. Go to France (or any other Francophone country) and mention singers and bands like *Natasha St-Pier, Céline Dion, Coeur de Pirate, Pierre Lapointe, Garou, la Bottine souriante, Mes Aïeux, Lynda Lemay, Ariane Moffatt, Mylene Farmer, les trois accords*, and you'll see -

they are huge in France! Québec writers, actors, films and television shows are also very popular. A lot of European singers come to Québec to start their careers, like Lara Fabian, Shy'm or Zaho. Québec's *Office de la langue française* has contributed **many** new words to the French language, like *courriel*, *pourriel*, *logiciel*, *baladodiffusion*, *banc de neige*, *traversier*, *hameçonage*, *espilogiciel*, and the list goes on and on.

Vive la différence!

So, what are some of the differences between Québec French and Parisian French? Here are some main points:

- «Tu» or «Vous»? - In Québec, being a North-American culture, informality often takes precedent to formality. Québeckers switch to «tu» much much faster than their European counterparts, often using «tu» quickly after a first meeting. Students often use «tu» with their teachers. Acquaintances will often switch to «tu» after one or two conversations.
- What is all that buzzing going on? - A feature of Québec phonetics is a «z» sound used after «D» and a «s» used after «T» when these letters are found before «i» or «u». This makes words like *Diane*, *dû*, *différent*, *dire*, *tu*, *tigre*, *tuile* sound like *Dziane*, *dzû*, *dzifférent*, *dzire*, *tsu*, *tsigre*, *tsuille*. This is one of the most distinguishing features of a Québec accent.
- The word *une auto* is preferred to *une voiture*. *Un char* is the slang word for «car».
- Words like *la fin de semaine*, *le stationnement*, *le traversier*, *magasiner*, *faire du magasinage* are much preferred to *le weekend*, *le parking*, *le ferry*, *faire du shopping*, which are more used in Europe.
- The *futur proche* (aller + infinitif) has almost become the default future tense construction, replacing the *futur simple* in spoken French. A Québecker will say «*je vais le faire*» 20 times more than he would say «*je le ferai*».
- Curse words in Québec are completely different than those in France. Most curse words are religious in nature, while in France, most vulgarities

are sexual in nature. A Québécois cursing in France would sound like someone praying in a really angry voice!

- In France, the colloquial word for «a job» is *un job*. In Québec, it's *une job*. In most of the French-speaking world, *autobus* is masculine. In Québec City, it's feminine! Go figure...
- In everyday, spoken Québec French, as in most of the French-speaking world, the «ne» in negation is left off. In speaking, most people do not use «ne» unless they are really emphasizing the negative aspect of a verb.
- The particle «tu» is attached to the conjugated verb of a sentence to make it into a question, **in spoken, informal** French. This is used as frequently (and in some circles, more frequently) as «est-ce que».

*est-ce que c'est cher? ----- c'est-tu cher?
est-ce qu'il y a....? ----- il y a-tu....?

- The pronoun «on» has almost completely replaced the subject pronoun «nous» to say «we». «Nous» remains in the language as an object pronoun, of course.

*Nous allons y aller ----- on va y aller.
Nous sommes partis ----- on est partis.
Nous aimerions voyager ----- on aimerait voyager

- The word «pi» or «pis» is systematically used instead of the word «et», to mean «and», in the spoken language. In written French, we still use «et».

*Toi et moi, nous allons y aller ----- toi **pi** moi, on va y aller.

- Even if a person lives alone, we have a tendency to pluralise «chez».

*Chez moi ----- chez nous
Chez toi ----- chez vous
Chez lui, elle ----- chez eux

- In Québec, we tend to *écouter* a film, TV, radio, videos, and DVD's. Maybe we just like to emphasize that we use our ears!
- While the French use «si» as a negative «yes», in Québec, we just use «oui»

*Tu n'es pas étudiant!

Si, je suis étudiant! (In Québec: «oui, je suis étudiant!»)

- The expression «ça m'est égal» to say «I don't care» is hardly used in Québec. We prefer: «ça (ne) me dérange pas!» or «ça (ne) fait pas de différence!».
- Québec is sometimes called «làlà land» because of the frequency of the word «là», used all over the place. This word can carry many meanings:

Et là, il est revenu ----- and **then**, he came back.

Heille, arrête là! ----- Hey, stop that, **eh**.

Tu veux que je le fasse là là? ----- You want me to do it **right now**?

- In spoken informal Québec French, people tend to use «à cte heure» or sometimes spelt «asteur» to mean «maintenant». This is actually a more archaic way of saying «now», once used in European French, meaning «at this hour». Look at the Spanish word for «now», **ahora**, which means «at hour». In Italian, it's **ora**, meaning just «hour».
- In Québec, the word for «kid» is «un flot». In France, the word is «un gosse», which means *testicle* in Québec French. Be careful when speaking. Imagine saying something like «embrasse les gosses pour moi!» in Québec! You're definitely not saying «kiss the kids for me»!
- In Québec, we say «une blonde» for a girlfriend (in slang), despite her hair colour!

- In Québec, we use «à cause de» to mean *because of*, for positive and negative connotations. In France, *à cause de* has a negative connotation, whereas *grâce à* has a positive one.
- The names of the daily meals in Québec are : *le déjeuner, le dîner, le souper*. This does not carry the same class connotation as *dinner* and *supper* do in English (versus *lunch* and *dinner*). In fact, these words were the original way of naming the meals in France, until after the French revolution (remember the history part of this article?). *Déjeuner* means «the unfast» or «the de-fast». *Dîner* means «the noon meal». I don't know about you, but it makes more sense to use these words than *le petit déjeuner, le déjeuner, le dîner*. In most francophone areas outside of Paris, people tend to use *déjeuner, dîner, souper* to speak of their meals.
- In Québec, the word *brun* is used exclusively. *Marron* is a European word.
- In Parisian French, to say «I hate», one would say *je hais*, not contracting the «je». In Québec French, it is contracted, giving us *j'haïs*.
- The present subjunctive form of the verb «aller» is conjugated differently in spoken Québec French:

*que j'**alle**, que tu **alles**, qu'il **alle**, qu'ils **allent***

- The verb «s'asseoir» is conjugated differently in Québec (in written and spoken French):

*je m'**assois**, tu t'**assois**, il s'**assoit**, nous nous **asseyons**,
vous vous **asseyez**, ils s'**assoient***

- In informal, spoken Québec French, «je vais» is often conjugated «je vas».
- In informal, spoken Québec French, «je suis» is often contracted to «chu»
- In informal, spoken Québec French, «je vais/je vas» is often contracted to «m'as».

Je vais te l'envoyer ----- m'as te l'envoyer.

Un mot final

Finally, I'd just like to address one last thing. Why do I write *Parisian* French and not *French* French, when I make comparisons? Well, simply because there is really no such thing as *French French*. Parisian French is the variety of French most often taught in books and in French-as-a-second language classes. In France, there are many different accents and varieties of French - some of which are quite different from Parisian French. Find some examples of the accents spoken in the south of France - they differ a lot from a Parisian accent, in many cases, just as much as Québec French differs from Parisian French. French speakers in northern, western, or eastern France have different words and different accents from those of Paris. I won't even get into Belgian, Swiss, Luxembourgish, Congolese, Senegalese, Moroccan, Algerian, Lebanese, Acadian, or Cajun French - which all have their own standards and individual features. French has just as many varieties as English does, but as someone from Sacramento, California can understand someone from London, England - a person from Trois-Rivières can understand someone from Bordeaux. The important thing to keep in mind is that any Québécois can be easily understood in France. There are thousands and thousands of Québécois living in France and in Francophone Europe. They don't need to «re-learn» their language to live in these countries. Your own professor lived in Paris and did a degree at the Sorbonne, without ever modifying his accent or way of speaking. There are many television shows featuring Québécois living or travelling around France - they don't modify their accents or speech when talking to the French, and they are completely understood. Also, there are tens of thousands of French people living in Québec, and their numbers are increasing by leaps and bounds every year. They have just as much «trouble» understanding the people around them as would a Londoner living in Halifax.

Why is it then that Parisian French remains the most often taught variety of French in English Canada? Well, for many reasons, most of which are outdated and even a bit ignorant, but look at it this way - in the United States or in Canada, when you study Spanish, you are most likely studying Mexican Spanish. Why? It is the variety of the Spanish language that you have the most chances of encountering. If you were British and studying Spanish, you'd probably be learning European Spanish. If you were an ESL student in the United States, you'd learn American English - for the same reasons. Most students of Portuguese in North America learn

Brazilian Portuguese, which is *drastically* different from European Portuguese in its informal register. Millions of Europeans learn British English because it's the English that they will have the most contact with.

In my humble opinion, Canada should be no exception when it comes to French. Québec French, along with Acadian French, is Canada's French. Be a proud Canadian and learn more about your own country's varieties of French, which are just as legitimate and important as any other variety. Québec French fights way above its weight class in the Francophone world - something to be proud of rather than something to denigrate, I say. Don't be fooled by mere hearsay and rumour.

Bonne chance ;)

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