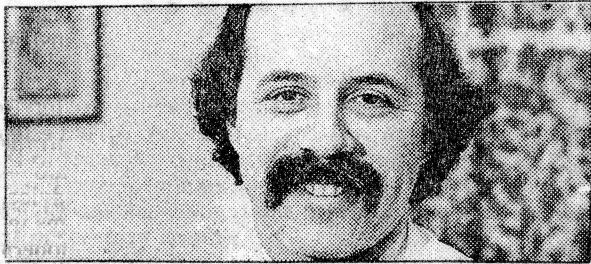


BOOKS



A. M. CLARFIELD

SPEAKING OF LANGUAGE

Anglo English becoming dialectal experience

On a recent trip back to Toronto, my birthplace, I realized that I no longer spoke the language I learned there as a small boy growing up. No, I now spoke a new and evolving dialect, that of the Quebec English speaker.

All languages are in a constant state of flux. If you doubt this contention, consult any page of the Oxford English Dictionary, which will turn up borrowings from Arabic and Hebrew, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Malay, Chinese, the languages of Java, Australia, Tahiti, Polynesia and West Africa. The astute reader will even come across references to some of the aboriginal languages of Brazil.

Returning to the subject of Montreal, I realized of late that I was now speaking some kind of pidgin or patois, Engçais you might call it. For example, during my time in Toronto, I told my mother I would meet her downtown. How would I get there? Did I need the car? she asked. "Of course not," I replied. "I'll take the Métro."

"Métro what, dear?" she asked. "The metropolitan bus service, or is that a new taxi company?"

In Toronto, I realized, they call the Métro the subway (which in the U.K. refers to a pedestrian underpass).

However one travels in Montreal, one has to eat. And until the recent relaxation of Sunday shopping laws, one had often to have recourse to the local dépanneur. Now I am no French expert. Yet I believe that in any good dictionary, dépanneur refers to a "breakdown mechanic" or a "trouble shooter." I guess when you desperately need a loaf of bread or a beer (or both?), you head for someone who can fix things up.

In other provinces of our frayed federation these shops are euphemistically labelled "convenience stores." In Toronto it's the "Mac's Milk."

Can you imagine telling a Montreal anglo, "I'm going down to the convenience store at Monkland and Draper?" He would wonder where exactly you were headed. If you mentioned the corner store, but your local Provisoir was in the middle of the block, your anglo friend would begin to think you mad. If, in desperation you countered with, "OK, OK, I'm going down to the Mac's Milk," he would probably ask, "Who's Max?"

Subtle change in meanings

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You might say that in writing this piece, I have taken on the language dossier. While clearly "dossier" is perfectly acceptable English (meaning "a collection of documents, etc. relating to a particular matter or person," it has taken on a subtly, changed meaning in the mouths of this city's anglo dialectician. In the rest of the country, while trying to squirm out of some duty, you might try, "That's not really my responsibility." In Montreal, the irresponsible scoundrel (whom we call the "responsible") would counter with, "That's Steve's dossier."

A friend who is a union big shot at a community college has his own vocabulary. He goes to meetings dealing with "syndical affairs," and if the topic turns to the education of his students, he'll discuss their "formation." When my buddy has to circulate a document relating to one of his dossiers, he'll "diffuse" it.

Pronunciation is also transformed

It is not only our vocabulary that has been transformed, but pronunciation as well. For example, in English, the word "surveillance" is pronounced with the double "l" sounded. In French, the word is pronounced as if the "ll" were a "y," as in "surveyance." Guess how we anglos say the word? Careful surveillance on my part has confirmed that most pronounce it as if they were francos.

Language changes inexorably. At least in the larger English-speaking world, we find shorter words being used in smaller sentences than was the case in the past. Even Winston Churchill, back in 1897, wrote that he preferred short words because "their meaning is more ingrained in the national character and they appeal with greater force to simple understanding than words recently introduced from Latin (read: French) and Greek."

Our language *is* getting plainer and clearer. Every where, that is except among Quebec anglos, who are in great danger of speaking a tongue that shortly no one but they will understand.

The final irony is to consider the reasons why moved from Toronto to Montreal. The first was that my wife had been accepted at McGill medical school. The second — to learn French.

■ A. M. Clarfield is a Montreal doctor.

