

in Fransaskoisie: Competing ideologies regulating the inclusion of French-speaking immigrants in English Canada

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The Fransaskois are a French-speaking minority, now comprising less than 10% of the English-speaking province of Saskatchewan in Canada. Established from the onset of European colonization in Western Canada (circa 1752), the French became outnumbered by the British a century later. Despite successive bans on schooling in French and the highest assimilation rate among Francophone minorities in Canada, the Fransaskois community persisted, albeit somewhat covertly. With a high birthrate, they compensated English-speaking population growth (mostly generated by immigration) until the mid twentieth century. In more recent years, facing demographic decline, the Fransaskois, and similar francophone minorities throughout English Canada, have endeavored to encourage French-speaking immigration.

In this paper, we seek to disentangle an array of competing ideologies regarding the definition of the Fransaskois community in light of the changing demographics of French-speaking citizens in Saskatchewan. We do this by exploring several differing narratives about the inclusion of French-speaking immigrants into Fransaskoisie.

The paper draws on over 10 years of ongoing mixed-methods research among francophone minorities in English Canada: qualitative ethnographic fieldwork comprising semi-structured interviews, focus groups, direct observation, and participant observation; as well as 2 quantitative surveys totaling over 3000

respondents, including 238 French-speaking immigrants in Saskatchewan surveyed in 2015.

First, we will show how the official Canadian federal regulation of language duality is rooted in a classic liberal ideology of individual freedom, which does not recognize the existence of a community, bound by social ties, specific forms of sociability, or other cultural traits. This governmental narrative purports that a French-speaking immigrant settling in Saskatchewan automatically “counts” as part of what the public policy lingo calls the “official language minority community” (OLMC), regardless of his/her sense of belonging or effective social integration into the local Fransaskois community.

Second, we explore the evolution of the narrative about Fransaskoisie put forth by the organisations which speak in its name, such as the Fransaskois Community Assembly (*Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise* - ACF), a nongovernmental yet elected body of representatives. Like other French-speaking minorities in English Canada, Fransaskoisie was traditionally self-defined through a form of “ethnic” nationalism (Brubaker 1992; Zimmer 2008), not only with language, but more predominantly with Catholic religion and ethnicity. This narrative seemed to create obstacles to the integration of French-speaking newcomers. In an effort to open the community to immigrants, the ACF put forth a high profile narrative challenging traditional ideas about belonging, and toured the province with its “Commission on inclusion” in 2005.

Thirdly, we look at everyday social representations among “ordinary citizens” (Dryzeck 1990). We compare native-born Fransaskois and French-speaking immigrants established in Saskatchewan, with regards to their self-declared sense of belonging and their representations of the identity markers characterizing the Fransaskois community. By exploring the lived experience of the way French-speaking immigrants build belonging to Fransaskoisie and how locals view these newcomers in the context of inclusive (official and associative) narratives, we address some crucial

issues facing liberal Western democracies today: is language alone sufficient build an enduring sense of belonging to a historical, "imagined" community?