

JUMP IN THE LAKE

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To learn to swim, jump into the water and swim.

Many expert swimmers have learned to swim in this manner. Some of them in the later stages of their apprenticeship have received instruction from coaches. Some have read books which suggest refinements of style. It is unlikely that anyone has learned to swim through listening to gramophone records, following a course of lectures or reading a book. All these things help, but they do not teach swimming.

You must plunge into the water and try for yourself. You will thrash around in an ungainly manner and swallow a considerable quantity of water. Several sessions and many pints of water later, you will find that you can swim.

Between learning to swim and learning to speak a second language a parallel may be drawn. The analogy is neither new nor complete, but it contains elements of truth which bear examining.

The very best way to learn to speak a language is to speak it. Place yourself in a situation where you must speak your target language to survive. Survive you will, and you will speak the language in question.

It is thus that the immigrant learns English in the United States and most of Canada. In this manner the French-speaking Québécois learns English. It is not, however, in this way that the English-speaking Canadian learns French in Québec or anywhere else. More of this later!

The idea of *bathing* the student in the target language — see how our analogy persists — lies at the root of university summer courses where students are forbidden to use a language other than the one which they are studying. The principle applies also in classrooms where a conscientious teacher enforces the same rule. We find a similar application in intensive courses like *Voix et Images de France* — a system which works most effectively when students have absolutely no access to their mother tongue throughout the duration of the course.

Did you notice the transition implied in the preceding paragraph? We had been dealing with the natural way of language learning; suddenly we turned to artificial ways of language learning. The best way is the natural way when it can be

followed. Sometimes we cannot follow the natural way; then we must resort to invented ways.

To return to swimming: a child of nature who lives in the wilderness where he must learn to survive, and where all his attention is focussed on this task, acquires the ability to swim as part of his survival technique. Nobody teaches him; he learns. A child who lives in an advanced society must learn many additional skills. There is no time for him to learn to swim the natural way, so he must be taught.

Similarly most people lack the time to learn a second language through immersion; they, too, must be taught.

It should appear from what has been said that teaching constitutes a short cut to learning. Teaching aims to eliminate time-wasting effort and to channel energies into activities most highly productive of learning.

Obviously, teaching will be most effective where some of the conditions of natural learning are found. English-speaking people should be able to find such conditions in the Province of Québec. That is why many English-speaking Canadians, leaving another part of the country to live in Québec, are sped on their way with the friendly observation: "*Now* you will learn to speak French!" A pious hope that is seldom fulfilled.

Extraordinary to relate, very few Anglo-Canadians in Québec can really be said to speak French. To this sweeping indictment there are notable and honourable exceptions; in the main, however, the statement is all too true.

In the past, motivation has been lacking. The English-Canadian has usually found himself in an economically favourable position. Thus he has been able to choose the language in which he desired to communicate. Not unnaturally he has chosen English. Furthermore, he has tended to associate chiefly with people of similar background, so that he has indeed lived in an Anglo-Canadian society. The problem of teaching French to him and to his children has not differed materially from that faced by teachers of French elsewhere in English-speaking America.

Surprised and vaguely ashamed because he does not speak French, the English-speaking Québécois has sometimes found comfort in the thought that after all the French spoken in Québec is not very good French. He is wrong. One can certainly hear poor French in Québec. One can hear poor French

in France, too — and poor English in England as well as in North America. In Québec as well as in France one can also hear excellent French, French which is second to none in “correctness” and style.

The myth of French-Canadian *patois* has foundation in fact. Canadian French suffers pressure from English, which surrounds and permeates the Gallic language. Canadian French contains a small proportion of expressions and of peculiarities of pronunciation which are vestiges of the language spoken in Europe when the Canadians came to the New World. Canadian French has evolved in the new environment much as Canadian and American English have evolved. Canadian French is spoken by the educated and the illiterate.

In some respects Canadian French has resisted anglicisation more successfully than has European French. *Le week-end*, *faire de l'autostop*, *le softball*, familiar to continental Frenchmen, are *la fin de semaine*, *voyager sur le pouce*, and *la balle molle* in Canada. The danger in French Canada is rather the temptation to think in English with a French vocabulary: *chercher pour* (*chercher*), *parler à travers son chapeau* (*parler à tort et à travers*). For that matter, whether one speaks of *un week-end* or of *une fin de semaine*, one is dealing with an English contribution to the joys of living.

A frequently mentioned example of Canadian French evolution is the adoption of terms used for various conditions of snow. Snow is unknown in many parts of France, an occasional nuisance in others, a source of revenue in a few ski resorts. In French Canada, snow is a recurrent phenomenon for approximately one third of the year. Of course French Canadians talk about it. *Un banc de neige* is a snow bank; *la poudrerie* is fine powdered snow. Should the French Canadian not use the terms because they are unknown in this context in Europe?

If your politics are conducted in British parliamentary tradition, why not call the Speaker *l'orateur*? In France *l'orateur* is an orator, a spokesman, while *le speaker* announces programmes on radio and on television (*l'annonceur* in Québec). *Le speaker* has a feminine counterpart — *la speakerine*. Oh, *la belle pureté de la langue française de la métropole!*

Serious efforts are being made in Québec to direct the growth of Canadian French along orderly lines consistent with the historic development of French and the nature of

the language. Canadian French, well spoken, will continue to be acceptable in the French-speaking world just as Canadian English, well spoken, will continue to be acceptable in the English-speaking world.

Does the English-speaking Québécois consider that his own speech is a poor model for the French-Canadian learning English?

The English-speaking Canadian has an amazing ability to find reasons not to learn French. If you maintain that Canadian French is indeed worth learning, he is apt to assert that the programme taught in our schools is irrelevant to the needs of Québec because "it teaches Parisian French."

Nonsense!

The programme aims at teaching standard French — French that is neither the speech of Paris nor Marseilles nor Brussels nor Montréal nor Québec. Just French.

Learn standard French as taught in our schools. Listen to French radio. Watch French T.V. Speak French wherever possible — on the street, in the shops, on the train —

"Whenever I *try* to speak French, the French-Canadian answers me in English."

Of course he does! In the first place he is polite; he returns the compliment you have paid him by using his language. In the second place, he is astute. He knows that he needs practice in English. Finally, he is determined; he intends to speak English whenever he can. Be equally polite, astute, and determined. Continue the conversation in French. You have the right to use French and nobody can deprive you of that right in Canada, particularly in Québec.

"Oh! — Jump in the lake!"

That, sir, is exactly what we are trying to persuade *you* to do.

In times of change, we have three choices: we may resist change, we may accept the changes that are forced upon us, or we may participate in the reform movements, through which we may master the forces of change in some measure at least. The latter, it seems clear to me, is the choice we should make because it would be hopeless to set our minds against changes so insistent and urgent as those now facing us, and I would not wish to surrender the direction of education to the blind forces either of nature or of human nature. Too much is at stake for that.

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