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## Quebec Tries to Say Au Revoir to ‘Hi,’ and Hello to ‘Bonjour’

By Dan Bilefsky, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/world/canada/bonjour-hi-quebec.html?module=WatchingPortal&region=c-column-middle-span-region&pgType=Homepage&action=click&mediaId=thumb\\_square&state=standard&contentPlacement=17&version=internal&contentCollection=www.nytimes.com&contentId=https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/world/canada/bonjour-hi-quebec.html&eventName=Watching-article-click&\\_r=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/world/canada/bonjour-hi-quebec.html?module=WatchingPortal&region=c-column-middle-span-region&pgType=Homepage&action=click&mediaId=thumb_square&state=standard&contentPlacement=17&version=internal&contentCollection=www.nytimes.com&contentId=https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/world/canada/bonjour-hi-quebec.html&eventName=Watching-article-click&_r=2)

MONTREAL — A customer at a pet shop in Napierville, Quebec, once threatened to complain to the province’s French-language watchdog agency because a parrot called Peek-a-Boo refused to speak French.

In an episode known as “[Pastagate](#),” the agency — which staunchly defends the French language in Quebec — told an Italian restaurant in Montreal that it had violated the law by using the word “pasta” on its menu rather than translating it into the language of Voltaire.

But the latest example of this long-simmering culture war here in Quebec happened just last week, when provincial legislators unanimously passed a resolution calling for shopkeepers to stop saying “Bonjour hi” when they greet customers and to say simply “Bonjour” instead.

The [backlash](#) was immediate and is still reverberating.

In Quebec, a former French colony that was ceded to Britain in 1763 after Britain defeated France in the Seven Years’ War, questions about language and identity run deep. Montreal, which has a sizable English-speaking minority, has long been a flash point.

Language [laws](#) make French the official language of government, commerce and the courts in the province. [Commercial advertising and public signs](#) must be in French and if another language is added, French must be “markedly predominant,” at least twice as large as other languages.

To help safeguard the French language, children of immigrant families are required to attend French schools.

Yet Montreal remains a swaggering multicultural city where French and English often co-mingle. Many among the young generation of Quebecers, reared on a steady diet of American popular culture and English-language social media, switch easily between the two languages.

Walk into a boutique or restaurant in downtown Montreal, and there is a decent chance the shopkeeper will say, “Bonjour hi!,” a hybrid greeting that reflects the cosmopolitan city’s vaunted bilingualism.

This custom has irked members of the Parti Québécois, a party that has advocated for an independent Quebec. And so it sponsored a motion in Quebec’s legislature inviting “all

businesses and workers who enter into contact with local and international clients to welcome them warmly with ‘Bonjour.’ ” And just “Bonjour.”

The motion, which is not legally enforceable, passed on Thursday, 111 to 0.

No sooner had its ink dried, though, some shopkeepers lashed out at the effort to police language, even as supporters said the move was necessary to help preserve the province’s cultural identity.

Over the weekend at [Giant bike shop](#), in a bilingual neighborhood in west Montreal, a group of French-speaking bike enthusiasts discussed the challenges of winter biking, with French and English rolling off their tongues with the ease of a gear-switch on a bicycle.

“It is absurd,” Olivier La Roche, a French-speaking Quebecer who runs the shop said, referring to the resolution. “What are they going to do, come into my shop and arrest me for how I greet people?”

He said he routinely greets customers with “Bonjour” but switches to English if the customer is a native English speaker.

“I am a proud Quebecer,” he continued. “But we are in a free country and this is business and it comes down to the customer. We should be allowed to greet people how we like.”

Others who favor the “Bonjour hi” combination turned to social media to vent their frustration.

“I’m a French-Canadian bilingual hostess in a restaurant and it’s the first thing I say when I greet customers,” Maude Lussier-Racine, [wrote on Twitter](#). “It’s not irritating, it’s respectful for everyone. Stop trying to make us do what you want and go do something else more important.”

Proponents of the motion say French Canadians have every reason to be concerned about preserving the French language at a time of globalization, when English is the lingua franca of the world. After all, the younger generation of Quebecers could easily be [tempted](#) to say “email” rather than “courriel,” its French Canadian equivalent.

[The Office Québécois de la Langue Française](#), the watchdog agency, has sought to [fend off Anglicisms](#) creeping into the French language by coming up with alternatives. But it recently allowed “grilled cheese,” “softball,” and “[drag queen](#)” to enter daily usage in an apparent nod to the idea that language is organic and evolves.

It has now been deemed acceptable in everyday usage to use “cocktail” instead of “coquetel” and baby boom instead of “bébé-boum.”

In introducing the “Bonjour” resolution, [Pascal Bérubé](#), a leading member of the Parti Québécois, said that the “Bonjour hi” greeting was an “irritant,” and that using “Bonjour” was a reminder that Quebec was a French-speaking province. Quebec politicians may have received

inspiration from across the Atlantic in France, where the failure to greet a stranger with a hearty “Bonjour” can invite icy silence.

Party officials also justified the motion by citing recent census data showing that the use of French as the prominent language in the workplace has dropped by 2.3 percent over the past decade, even as bilingualism at the office had grown — evidence, they say, that the French language could be endangered.

Writing in *Le Journal de Montréal* on the day the resolution was passed, [Josée Legault](#), a leading columnist, argued that the failure by the Quebec political class to protect the French language was a “revolting phenomenon” at a time of encroaching bilingualism. She called on Quebec’s politicians to wake up before it was too late.

In another convulsion over language, an uproar erupted last month when [Adidas opened a flagship shoe store in Montreal](#) and its Francophone manager gave an introductory speech mostly in English. Quebec City’s mayor, [Régis Labeaume](#), called the omission “scandalous,” while others threatened to boycott the store. Adidas apologized.

[Bill Brownstein](#), a veteran columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*, an English-language newspaper, said seizing on the language issue reflected a desperate effort by the [Parti Québécois](#) to try and grab attention at a time when nationalism is waning and it was trailing in the polls ahead of provincial elections next year.

But he stressed that the old and emotive debates over language were dissipating as economic imperatives trumped nationalism.

“Language is always a Pandora’s box in Quebec,” he said. “But today’s young Quebecers are more interested in making money. The language wars have been won.”