Your French Might Not Be Enough for Quebec

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Quebec's regional flag emphasizes their connection to France

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A French woman applying for permanent residency in Quebec has been denied on the basis of insufficient competency in the French language. The decision was based off of the five chapters of her doctoral thesis that were written in English. Quebec has always emphasized French as a language of the region; recently, this has come into contrast with the rest of Canada's similar bilingual policy (which puts more weight towards English). We can analyze this decision by looking at it through the lens of nationalism.

Nationalism refers to an ideology that uses the same culture or language (thus creating a common identity) to bond people together under what they perceive as the nation. It combines a variety of symbols and history to create this culture, and in doing so, creates labels like “us” and “them”. Quebec has a long history intertwined with France, leading them to use the French language and identity themselves as French Canadians. By stating that the French language must be used in Quebec, the government is drawing connections to their French heritage, as well as defines what is a French Canadian and what isn’t; ultimately making a distinct Quebecois identity. Resolutions the Quebec government has passed (like ruling that shop owners must say “bonjour” without saying “bonjour hi”) are prime examples of how nationalism is implemented in a top-down manner. This means that nationalism is spread through government laws and resolutions that enforce and reinforce loyalty and common identity within the state. In Quebec, it’s done through French language and customs.

This view of a separate identity from both the English culture and language has sparked separation movements within Quebec itself. In 1995 Quebec held a referendum on whether to secede from Canada, but the attempt failed. While Quebec has remained with Canada, the region wants more autonomy. Utilizing their connection to the French language and customs might create friction both within the region and between other parts of Canada. People with English heritage might feel marginalized. In addition, because the rest of Canada puts English first (rather than French), Quebec and their want for autonomy presents a challenge for common identity in Canadian nationalism.