

3

THE FORKED TONGUE

OR

The Road Not Taken in Québec

*Mon pays,
Ce n'est pas un pays,
C'est l'hiver.*

—Gilles Vigneault, from his song “Mon Pays”

BOTH SIDES AGAINST THE MIDDLE

I expected to find a contest between a government and a people: I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle, not of principles, but of races; and I perceived that it would be idle to attempt any amelioration of laws and institutions until we could first succeed in terminating the deadly animosity that now separates the inhabitants of Lower Canada into the hostile divisions of English and French.

—Lord Durham, *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (1839)

Popular ways of speaking about language do not differ much from those about race or even species. Not only are the linguistic and natural historians' terms for genus and species often the same, but, more important, as Charles Darwin observed, “the proofs that [different languages and distinct species] have been developed through a gradual process are curiously the same.”¹ In its dialectics of universal-particular and terminus-origin, the ideology of linguistic historiography (Grimm) differs little from that of species historiography (Darwin) or racial historiography (Gobineau).

A case in point is the rhetoric of the universal in natural history and linguistics. Many natural historians hypothesize a human “monogenesis”—a single genetic origin of all presently living human beings—and sketch a family tree that illustrates a supposed divergence of humankind from a single DNA stock. The hypothesis of

“Eve, mother of humankind” in the logic of this natural history,² like the apostle’s claim that “God made of one blood all the peoples of this earth” in the logic of Christian kinship,³ is both comfortingly unitarian (“All men are my consanguineous kin”) and critically divisive (“Only my consanguineous kin are brothers, all others are animals”). Many historical linguists likewise hypothesize a single original source or locale for all human languages, some claiming to have “reconstructed the ancestor of all living languages”⁴—the pre-Babel Ur-language that seventeenth-century theorists called “Adamic”⁵ and modern linguists call “Nostratic.” Belief in the historical existence of this unitarian language is “a kind of religion [that] emphasize[s] the unity of humankind and the need of brotherhood,”⁶ yet here, too, the ideal (“All human beings speak variants of the same language that we speak”) turns all too easily into the particularist political dogma (“Human beings are the creatures that talk our language, all others are animals”). *Nostratic* means “not yours” as much as “ours.”

Exactly how language mediates race or nation depends on whether the state or *polis* is conceived as essentially unilingual or multilingual. On the one hand, there are legally unilingual countries, like the United States, where citizens have political rights as individuals rather than as members of one or another particular linguistic or racial group. In the United States, for example, every American citizen has the same universal right to go to school or to argue in court, but there is no guaranteed right in the United States to attend school or to plead in court in the language of one’s choice (if one’s choice is not English). When American courts do grant permission to plead in a non-English language (as sometimes happens where there are many people who speak Spanish), and when differences frequently occur between the meaning of the law as written in English and its meaning in the non-English translation, the courts make their disposition according to the “original” English.

On the other hand, there are legally multilingual jurisdictions in North America where citizens have rights as members of particular racial or religious groups. In Québec, for example, citizens have group rights based on the division, according to the terms of the constitutional British North America Act (1867), of most of the people into Catholic and the Protestant groups or more precisely, into the English and French Catholic group and the English and French Protestant (or Huguenot) group. The written law exists—indeed, must exist—in equally valid or “original” form in both English and French.

The French and English Québécois have a historical right to attend school in their “native” religion. (The British North America Act established two state-supported religious schools boards, the Protestant board overseeing separate schools for English and French Protestants and the Catholic board overseeing separate schools for French and English Catholics. There are no secular or universal schools of the American sort.)⁷ From the group right to attend school in one’s native religion evolved the group right to attend school in one’s native language. For a century and more after the signing of the British North America Act, Protestant church leaders thus argued for English-language rights, basing their pronouncements on the

historical religious rights of the Anglo-Saxon minority—that is, the rights of the group of persons who are British “stock,” or *britannique de souche*—and Catholic leaders similarly argued for the French-language rights of the *Québécois de souche*.⁸

While the United States heeds equal rights of individuals as members of an ideally unilingual nation, generally subordinating the status of citizens as members of particular linguistic or racial groups, Québec heeds the rights of the English and French groups or the Protestant and Catholic groups, generally subordinating both the individual rights of citizens and the group rights of non-English and non-French linguistic or racial groups. (Exceptionally, the United States grants to some individuals as members of racial or linguistic groups an anomalous treatment under the law: The fact that blacks and Hispanics are covered by various affirmative-action rulings tends to lessen the difference in American ideology between race and language, as suggested by the occasionally racially ambiguous term *Hispanic*. There are parallels to the lessening of the difference between religion and language in Québec.)

What happens to those people in Québec who are, by consanguineous or linguistic generation, neither French nor English, or neither Catholic nor Protestant?⁹ Québec politicians in the late 1960s and 1970s followed the policy of the traditionalist Union nationale, an appropriately named political party of earlier decades, in assigning to every person either a French or English mother tongue (*langue*). This meant that the state had to determine the language (*langue*) in which a particular citizen felt him- or herself to be fluent or actually was so—in order to assign the appropriate language of school instruction or to designate the proper agency of school tax collection. Since determination of the mother tongue generally also meant determining the national or racial origin of the parent (mother), the ideology of language policy in Québec was conflated explicitly with issues of consanguineous “nation” and race.

In the United States an immigrant becomes an American citizen in the civic ritual of “naturalization” by becoming a member of the one group of people reborn, or regenerated, as Americans when the Founding Fathers declared their independence from Great Britain. In Québec, on the other hand, the immigrant becomes a member of one people or the other (English or French). In the 1980s, for example, immigrants from non-English-speaking countries (allophones) and from most English-speaking countries (anglophones) were classified as “French” (franco-phone) for educational and taxation purposes. Thus, a person with Greek-speaking, Greek Orthodox parents was called “French.” By the same legal fiction, an English-speaking person from Singapore who was not *britannique de souche* was classified as French even though he might speak only English. (This racialist aspect of Québec politics, linking linguistic assignation with descent from a particular genetic stock, matches a discrimination already inherent in the British North America Act itself.)

According to a similar fiction, most Jews in Québec were classified as “English Protestants” even when they were, like the Moroccan *sefarads*, “native” Arabic- or

French-speakers. The fact that the Jews of Québec, whether *ashkenaz* or *sefarad*, both constituted something like a single nation as a group (with a single sacred written language) yet spoke various native languages besides French or English as individuals, tended to challenge the thesis—dear to European linguistic nationalists—that a common spoken language is the main distinguishing characteristic of nationhood.

It is a peculiar characteristic of Québec—one that helps to clarify its often misunderstood political and linguistic ideology—that its struggle over language and politics concerns not only immigrants who have no legally recognized language (i.e., who do not have English or French) but also true bilinguals (i.e., who have both English and French). Questions about assigning nationality to people who are, in linguistic terms, perfectly bilingual—or who have, in racial terms, one English and one French parent—hold the same position in the speculative theater of Québécois ideology as do questions about Siamese twins and interracial changelings in a United States concerned with problems of consanguineous and national identity. Moreover, linguistic miscegenation is often debated in Québec much as racial miscegenation is debated in the United States. (Some French Canadians called themselves Canadian *nègres*.)¹⁰ For example, in 1972 at the French-language Université de Montréal a debating union resolved that “English in twentieth-century Québec is a politically oppressive language.” Similarly, in 1973 it was resolved at the English-language McGill University that “English is an essentially oppressive language” (as opposed, say, to the language of an imperialist or colonizing political oppressor, like French in twelfth-century England). Finally, it was resolved at Concordia University that “the historical interaction between French and English make them essentially one language with a shared future terminus.” In this last resolution one topic would be “FrAnglais” (French turning into English) or FrEnglish (English turning into French).¹¹ Another would be “bilingual publicity”—the signs of the times.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Controversies about the language of public advertising loomed large in the headlines of Montréal’s newspapers when, in 1955, the federalist Canadian National Railroad decided to call Montréal’s new downtown station/hotel complex The Queen Elizabeth in honor of the English monarch, and the provincial Ligue d’Action nationale collected two hundred thousand signatures calling for the use of a French name such as Le Château Maisonneuve in honor of the French founder of Montréal.¹² Pierre Laporte, in a well-known essay published in the French journal *L’Action nationale* entitled “‘Queen Elizabeth?’ . . . Never!,” complained that “our cities are plastered with English names.”¹³ I was eight years old at the time, living with my parents and siblings on TransIsland Road in a duplex situated between French Catholic and English Protestant neighbors.

In 1959 the popularist Société Saint-Jean Baptiste de Montréal was arguing that English should never appear publicly without French. "It is necessary," wrote the Société's chairman, "to prohibit English unilingualism on everything that reaches the public: signs . . . billboards, menus, instructions, etc."¹⁴ By the mid-1960s the linguistic face of most of the island of Montréal was becoming distinctly French. For example, a major downtown department store, Morgan's, became La Baie/The Bay; most new public buildings had French names; and there were serious discussions about laws, eventually enacted in the early 1970s, to require bilingual consumer contracts and company names.¹⁵ In 1974 the Liberal party premier of Québec, Robert Bourassa, oversaw the legislative passage of Bill 22, which declared French as Québec's "official language" and required that all billboards and public signs include French.¹⁶

The momentous alternatives facing Québec in the mid-1970s was whether to be bilingually French and English—as ancient Babylonia, say, had been both Akkadian and Sumerian—or unilingually French. The desire or need to choose between bilingualism and unilingualism was the key element of the Québec scene when I returned there in 1973, after eight years of study elsewhere. Like a visual historian of a disappearing popular culture, I photographed hundreds of bilingual signs; like a writer for a litterateur's academic journal with political pretensions, I penned an essay entitled "La publicité bilingue au Québec: une langue fourchue" (as it appeared in the *Journal canadien de recherche sémiotique*) or "The Forked Tongue: Bilingual Advertisement in Québec" (as it appeared in *Semiotica*).

In the mid-1970s the broad outline of the unilingual "solution" to Québec's language problems was already unmistakable. In 1963, after all, the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste had argued that private companies and corporations in Québec should only have French names.¹⁷ (The terrorist Front de Libération du Québec, or FLQ, was founded in the same year.) And in the mid-1970s there was pressure from an increasingly "separatist" populace—represented by the new Parti Québécois—to pursue a unilingual policy.

The Parti Québécois came to power in 1976, and in 1977 one of the party's first acts was Bill 101—called "The Charter of the French Language"—which proclaimed French as the "public language of Québec."¹⁸ The Parti Québécois minister, Camille Laurin, claimed that Bill 101 was a "law of the people coming from the core of our collective history."¹⁹ He explicitly appealed to the francophone *Québécois de souche*—those who claimed to trace their bloodline to the "original family" of seventeenth-century immigrants. Promising his constituents that "the Québec we wish to build will be French in essence,"²⁰ Laurin called for a Québécois "reconquest of French."²¹ To match the military conquest of New France by England in 1759, there would be a linguistic reconquest of French in 1977 that would reclaim the "genuine" French of old Québec and assimilate Québec's allophone and anglophone populations.²² Peoples of English blood stock—*britannique de souche*²³—would be encouraged to emigrate, and indigenous Amerindian and

Inuit populations, which might have made good claims to being the true “original” settlers of the land, were now called *autochthone*, partly in order to distinguish their nativity from the fictive originality of the Québécois.²⁴

Laurin’s call for a Québécois “reconquest of French” often relied on the traditional social fiction of mother tongue—hence mother nation—in much the same way that sixteenth-century Christian rhetoric calling for the reconquest of Spain depended on the notion of blood purity. In Québec the rhetoric of reconquest and expulsion—of bloodlines and origin—influenced political discourse for a decade. The nationalist *Québécois de souche*, calling for others’ “francization” or expulsion, remembered the brutal expulsion by the British of the Québécois’ Acadian kin two centuries earlier.²⁵ (Just at the time that The Queen Elizabeth Hotel controversy hit the Montréal newspapers in 1955, twenty thousand descendants of the exiled Acadians were gathering in the Canadian maritime provinces to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the Acadian Expulsion.²⁶ English Governor Charles Lawrence’s 1755 proclamation calling upon Acadian francophones to meet at the church in Grand Pré, pronounced in both English and French, was a memorable sign of the times.)²⁷ Seeking to avoid a cajun-like extinction of language, and fearing bilingualism as the antechamber of cultural annihilation, the new Québécois chose to use the language of expulsion against others rather than to be assimilated themselves.²⁸ “I am a two-pawed singer / who yaps his beautiful songs / for a race on the way to extinction” wrote the poet Jacques Michel.²⁹ During the crisis of October 1970, when Prime Minister Trudeau declared the infamous War Measures Act, the FLQ *Manifesto* proclaimed that “the day is coming when all the [English-speaking] Westmounts of Québec will disappear from the map.”³⁰

Camille Laurin, a psychiatrist-turned-politician, figured that Bill 101’s language provision was the appropriate treatment for Québec’s national sickness. That disease, he said, was “linguistic degeneration” and all that it entails. Degeneration was an old theme in Québec’s political discourse,³¹ generally involving various quandaries about which dialect to use: Canayen, FrAnglais, the French of France, or *joual*. (*Joual*, sometimes called *cajun*,³² was at the center of the ideological controversy. The term derives from local pronunciations of *cheval*, meaning “horse”; the dialect it designates is sometimes compared with American “jive-talk” or “gumbo.”) Focusing on the language issue, Hubert Aquin had complained in 1962 in *Liberté* that Québec writers’ “fatigue culturelle” was nearly incurable. “As soon as I began to write,” Gérald Godin had written in *Parti Pris* in 1965, “I realized that I was a barbarian, i.e., a foreigner, according to the etymological meaning of the term. My mother tongue was not French but *français*. I have to learn French almost as a foreign language.”³³ Gaston Miron, in a 1973 essay, had discussed the linguistic schizophrenia and alienation that informed the diseased cultural life of Québec; briefly considering the “debilitating effects” of bilingual signs on the “purity” of the “French language,” he had called for a new “linguistic decolonization.”³⁴ Similarly, in 1975 Jacques Godbout had claimed that the “ideology” of *joual* was an “infantile disease of nationalism.”³⁵ It was out of this sociopsychiatric diagnostic

tradition focusing on language that Laurin's colleague, Gaston Cholette, came to stress "the psycho-cultural importance" of unilingual signs. The eradication of bilingual signs, by purifying the language of the tribe, would rehabilitate the self-esteem of the "essential nation."³⁶

The Parti Québécois's legislation against bilingual *publicité* in Bill 101 was aimed not only at curing the ills of the Québécois "nation"—at turning its *hiver*, in Vigneault's words (cited as the epigraph to this chapter), into a *pays*—but also at "converting" to the French lingua franca both the historically anglophone and the various allophone communities. René Lévesque, the Parti Québécois premier, remarked on the effect of bilingual *publicité* on these nonfrancophone communities in stating that "in its own way, each bilingual sign says to an immigrant: 'There are two languages here, English and French; you can choose the one you want.' It says to the Anglophone: 'No need to learn French, everything is translated.'"³⁷ With a few exceptions mandated noblesse-oblige style by Premier Lévesque, the Parti Québécois's "message" to both the historically anglophone and the immigrant communities was that French was *the* language of the province. The message had the executive backing of the Commission for the Protection of the French Language, which pursued and prosecuted violators of the law. Anglophone and allophone critics called its detectives "language police"; the Montréal-born novelist Mordecai Richler, writing from the United States, called them "tongue troopers."³⁸

In 1985, with the defeat of the Parti Québécois, the Liberal party's Bourassa reassumed the premiership of Québec. Trying to arbitrate the conflicts among the various linguistic communities, Bourassa hinted that he would create bilingual "territories" on the island of Montréal, where the English and French languages would appear together again legally on the same sign.³⁹ But in the wake of nationalist reaction to the Canadian Supreme Court's denial of the right of Québec courts to outlaw any bilingual signs, Bourassa instead passed through the Québec legislature a bill authorizing unilingual French signs on the outside of buildings and permitting bilingual signs with "clear French predominance" on the inside. Not surprisingly, the ambiguity of such "territorial" plans led to general apprehension. Who would distinguish *le dedans* from *le dehors*, and how?⁴⁰

Viewed from the vantage point of the early 1990s, the *visage* of Montréal is more French than ever, and the number of anglophones and *britanniques de souche* continues to decline. ("De plus en plus, le Québec se francise," writes Uli Lochner.)⁴¹ The Meech Lake Accord, though it lacks specific provisions about language and culture,⁴² now stipulates at the federal level that Québec is a "distinct society." Yet French fear of anglicization remains. Some language nationalists complain about banners like "Bâtir ce pays sur le rock" (Build this country on rock and roll);⁴³ others complain about the debilitating effect of "anglicized French" on public signs⁴⁴ or argue that all bilingualism "deforms" Québec's "collective unconscious."⁴⁵

It is not surprising that the problem of specifically bilingual public signs should remain: the essentially political dilemmas that underlie such signs endure. A bilingual agenda, sometimes based upon the individual rights of all persons (e.g., free-

dom of expression) and at other times based upon the group rights of the historically anglophone community (the modified British North America Act), is still pitted against a unilingual agenda informed by the national rights of the *Québécois de souche*.⁴⁶ “No compromise will satisfy both Alliance Québec and the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste,” wrote an astute Dion in *Le Devoir* in 1989.⁴⁷ Yet despite the continuing face-off—and sporadic events in the past decades that range from name calling to murder or assassination—there remains in Québec a genuine political decency and linguistic tolerance.⁴⁸

VOLKSWAGEN BLUES

We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.

—Heraclitus

The essay on bilingual advertising that follows was originally delivered in 1973 as a university lecture. At that time people in Québec were reaching beyond questions of individual free speech and toward questions of tribal or linguistic nationalism and economic class. Québec was vacillating between national separation from and federation with the rest of Canada. Separation was endorsed for nationalistic reasons by a labor movement that assumed, in an era of pseudosecularization, an anti-capitalist rhetoric reminiscent of the older church.⁴⁹ One symptomatic debate was whether non-French signs and bilingual signs should be allowed in the public sphere.

“The Forked Tongue” infuriated both parties in this debate because it pitted both sides against the middle. The editors of the French journal *Liberté* and of the English journal *Our Generation* criticized “The Forked Tongue” in diametrically opposite ways. The former argued that I should have taken the side of nationalist “labor,” which wanted to allow only French signs, and the latter argued that I should have taken the side of antinationalist “capital,” which wanted to allow all signs. In fact, “The Forked Tongue” mainly called for a tolerant bilingualism that might have helped somewhat to reveal—through the intensive form of public translation that is intermediated bilingual publicity—the then potentially fruitful political reciprocity of French and English in Québec. Coleman argues that “language policy through the mid 1970s served mainly to legitimate capitalism in Québec by taking the foreign (i.e., English) face off of it.”⁵⁰ (It is an indication of the political fury of those days that after the publication of “The Forked Tongue,” an anonymous writer threatened to kill me if I wrote again about bilingualism.)

We can’t step into the same river twice, at least not without ambiguity, but that doesn’t mean we should let sleeping dogs lie. Academic journalists with political predilections often prefer to let the dismembered past lie for them. (An extreme example would be Paul de Man writing in a bilingual Belgium during the fury of the Nazi period.)⁵¹ But Québec in the 1990s is still living out the political promises and contradictions of the 1970s. Interlinguistic mediation, though now generally

removed from the public *visage* of Québec, beguiles its literary writers and critics all the more. There has been an increasing fascination, in recent years, with the diglossia in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*,⁵² a renewed scholarly respect for *joual*; a rejuvenated interest in the theory of translating into English French texts that contain English words and translating into French English texts that contain French words;⁵³ much concern with the role of "transfugee" writers;⁵⁴ a burgeoning movement to increase the number of French anthologies of English writers;⁵⁵ and a renewed focus on publishing bilingual journals.⁵⁶ Despite all this, most social and literary critics ignore or obscure the epigraphic, literary quality of bilingual public advertisement; they mask its bilingual aspect with bureaucratic neologisms and often endorse outright censorship in the name of "the nation's health." In this way cultural criticism is denied its highest political purpose and becomes its own victim.

In the 1990s the tribal brotherhoods of Québec still search nostalgically for a national *régénération* from the ashes of the decisive Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Every Québec schoolboy and schoolgirl, both French and English, can recount the fateful day in 1759 when the opposing generals, Montcalm and Wolfe, died within hours of each other, almost as if the generals were spoofing—recapitulating in grand Hegelian historical style—the simultaneous deaths of the Oedipal twin brothers Polyneices and Eteocles.

In Jacques Poulin's Québécois novel *Volkswagen Blues* (1984), with its memorable linguistic code-switching,⁵⁷ language remains, as Heidegger is quoted as saying, "the house of being." But the house of language in *Volkswagen Blues*—the place where we are *chez nous* (at our own home) in the blues of America—is a metaphorical ferry on the move: a Volkswagen ("nation's car"). In Poulin's novel it is the character named Saul Bellow—a Jew from Montréal who long ago wandered to the United States—who has the drollest words about the tribal quality of the politics of language:

"When you're looking for your brother, you're looking for everybody!" *Il traduit lui-même sa phrase dans un français hésitant:*
—*Quand vous cherchez votre frère, vous cherchez tout le monde!*⁵⁸

BILINGUAL ADVERTISING IN QUEBEC (1974)

Translation ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form.

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

An advertisement is a trope which turns our attention toward a particular word or object. This trope and the word or object toward which it turns our attention are rhetorically as interdependent as a riddle and its solution, or as an epigraph and that on which it stands or might properly stand.⁵⁹

In the modern world, most advertisement turns our attention to brand names or to commodities. Modern advertisements, indeed, seem to constitute a unique language of commodities, the international use of which informs the modern world. The influence of this language is most apparent where bilingual and multilingual advertising is practiced.

Bilingual advertisement turns our attention toward a word or object in two languages at once. Like interlinguistic translation, bilingual advertisement depends on and itself expresses the reciprocity between two languages. Such reciprocity is most apparent in written advertisements, such as those in bilingual and commercial Québec. The ordinary exchanges of linguistic meaning in these signs are symptomatic of extraordinary exchanges in the language of commodities and in the political economy in general.

There are two principal kinds of mediators between English and French messages in the bilingual signs of Québec: objects outside the sign and semiotic units within the sign.




Objects Outside the Sign

Most bilingual signs in Québec present separate English and French messages which are mediated by the one object to which they both are supposed to refer. This object, on which the messages may or may not stand, is essential to the complete signification of the bilingual sign.⁶⁰ The sign "PONT/BRIDGE,"⁶¹ for example, is supposed to refer to an object (a bridge) which mediates between "PONT" and "BRIDGE." Signs which depend on similarly objective mediators include "CUL-DE-SAC/DEAD END," "COURSES AU GALOP/THOROUGHbred RACING," and "MCGILL UNIVERSITY/UNIVERSITÉ MCGILL" (see fig. 3-i). In these signs, one message is a complete or independent translation of the other. The possibility of such translation depends on the supposed existence of objects (e.g., a bridge, road, racetrack, or campus) which the words on the sign are supposed to represent. These objects, outside the sign, are mediators or translative agents.

Semiotic Units Within the Sign

Some bilingual advertisements in Québec contain linguistically different messages connected not (only) by objects outside the sign, but (also) by semiotic units within or on the sign. In the sign "UNIVERSITÉ MCGILL UNIVERSITY,"⁶² for example, the French message, "UNIVERSITÉ MCGILL" and the English message "MCGILL UNIVERSITY" are connected by "MCGILL," which mediates semiologically between and participates in both messages. In Québec there are several kinds of semiotic mediators: (1) pictures; (2) numbers; (3) literal intersections; (4) words; and (5) brand or corporation names. A semiotic mediator, as we shall see, turns or "advertises" the reader's attention away from the (other) words on the sign (which, however, it may help to explain or modify) and toward itself as a semiotic unit (e.g., "McGILL") or

toward the object (e.g., the campus of McGill University) which that semiotic unit is supposed to represent.

1. *Pictures.* In the road sign "PEDESTRIAN X PIÉTONS" (see fig. 3-ii), X is a pictorial or diagrammatic representation (of a highway intersection) which mediates between and participates in both English and French messages at the same time. Similarly,  in the sign "PONT  BRIDGE" is an interlinguistic mediator, whether the reader supposes  to be an interpretative aid for reading the words of the sign, or to be, like these words, a signifier of the object (a bridge) to which the sign directs our attention.

2. *Numbers.* Things apparently signified by pictures and diagrams often vary from one language group to another. There is less variance in the signification of numbers, which are among the most common mediators in Québec advertisements. In the sign "GABARIT 9' CLEARANCE," the number "9" and the diacritical mark "'" mediate between the English message "9' CLEARANCE" and the French message "GABARIT 9'." The mediating number "9" is printed in the prominent color red, and is located centrally after "GABARIT" and before "CLEARANCE," the correct location for a number in the syntactically different French and English languages. The sign "TAUX/RATES" (see fig. 3-iii) expresses similarly syntactic reciprocity between French and English. Located in the middle of the sign and printed in red, cardinal numbers signifying monetary units mediate between two linguistically different columns of ordinal numbers signifying chronological units. The numerical mediators in "VITESSE MAXIMUM 25 MAXIMUM SPEED," "A LOUER 381-3373 FOR RENT," and "NEW BRUNSWICK RBC-000 NOUVEAU-BRUNSWICK" also connect and complete French and English messages.

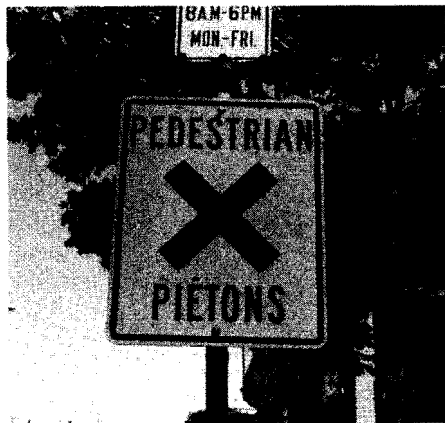
3. *Literal Intersections.* In bilingual advertisements French and English words sometimes intersect at common letters. In Figure 3-iv, for example, "ICE" and "GLACE cross at "C." The problem of whether the French or English word predominates visually is, to some extent, resolved by printing the French message horizontally (the way we read) and the English message vertically, and by coloring "C" in a color identical to that of the other letters in "ICE" but different from that of the other letters in "GLACE." Figure 3-v illustrates a similar crossword puzzle, in which the letter "O" connects and literally participates in the French message "2 POUR 25" and the English message "2 FOR 25."

4. *Words.* There are two kinds of ordinary verbal mediators: a word which appears alone on the sign and a word which connects an English and French message.

A word which appears alone on the sign: The *Dictionnaire FrAnglais Dictionary* states that "more than 8,000 words are alike, or almost the same, in English and in French."⁶³ The orthographic (if not phonetic) similarity between the English and French languages makes possible the employment of the same verbal unit as a sign to both English and French readers. "TELEPHONE" (see fig. 3-vi), "PROVISIONS," and "SERVICE" are examples of signs which express this similarity between French Canadian and Canadian English, although signs such as "ESSENCE" suggest how



i. MCGILL UNIVERSITY/UNIVERSITÉ MCGILL (entrance sign)



ii. PEDESTRIAN X PIÉTONS (pedestrian sign at crossing)



iii. TAUX/RATES (parking lot sign)



iv. ICE/GLACE (ice-dispensing machine sign)

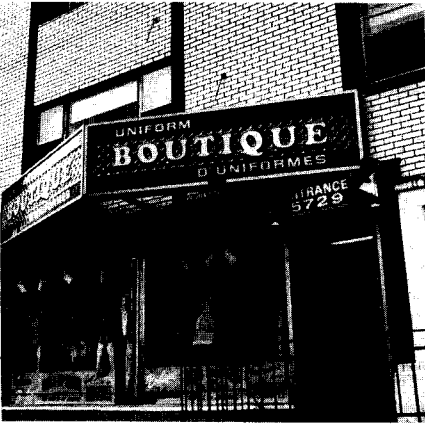


v. 2 POUR 25 (balloon man sign)

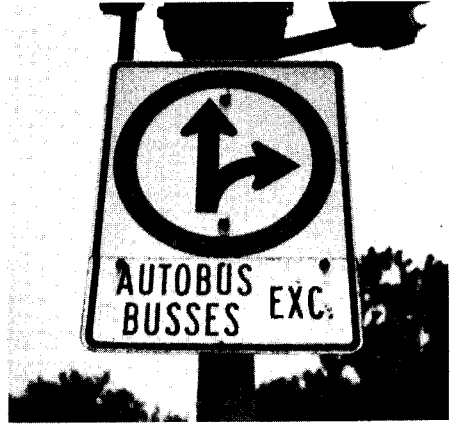


vi. TELEPHONE (telephone booth sign)

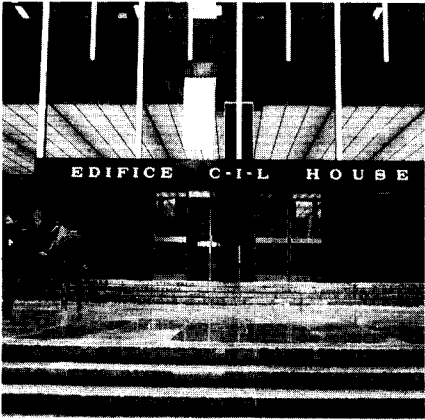
Fig. 3. Bilingual signs. Montréal, 1973.



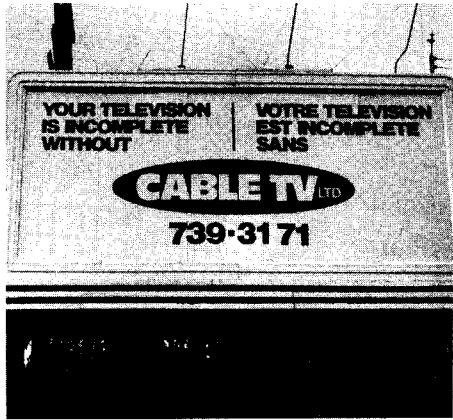
vii. UNIFORM BOUTIQUE D'UNIFORMES
(commercial sign)



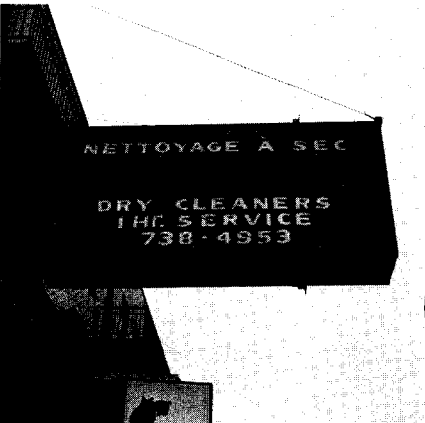
viii. AUTOBUS EXC. BUSSES (no parking sign)



ix. EDIFICE CIL HOUSE (entrance sign at
corporate headquarters)



x. YOUR TELEVISION IS INCOMPLETE WITHOUT CABLE TV LTD/VOTRE TÉLÉVISION EST INCOMPLÈTE SANS CABLE TV LTD
(billboard)



xi. NETTOYAGE À SEC CAPRICE INC. DRY CLEANERS, (proprietor's sign)



xii. APT MEDARD APT

political tendency of convincing speakers of both languages that English brand names can mediate French and English languages, and so solve the linguistic and perhaps, in some ideal fashion, also the economic problems of Québec. Some signs, such as “YOUR TELEVISION IS INCOMPLETE WITHOUT CABLE TV LTD/VOTRE TÉLÉVISION EST INCOMPLÈTE SANS CABLE TV LTD” (see fig. 3-x) and “LA CIE GENERAL SUPPLY DU CANADA LIMITÉE / THE GENERAL SUPPLY COMPANY OF CANADA [LIMITED],” would seem to accord to the English brand name the power to bridge (language differences) and to complete (sentences).

Not only English but also French and FrAnglais mediators are enhanced by their role in bilingual advertisements. Examples of such mediators include “SERVICE DE RENOVATION METROPOLITAIN HOME SERVICE,” “NETTOYAGE À SEC CAPRICE INC. DRY CLEANERS” (see fig. 3-xi), and “POSTE DE LA SALLE/STAND FOR LA SALLE.” The political implications of these and other brand name mediators can hardly be determined from their linguistic origins or etymologies, which do not consider the peculiar movement of brand names into all ordinary languages. “CIL,” for example, has now become a word in Canadian English (in which “CIL” was once merely the initials of a series of words) and in French Canadian (in which it was once linguistically meaningless). Sometimes company directors purposefully change the names of their corporations in order to mask their linguistic origins, and so placate linguistically nationalistic consumers. “Libby’s,” for example, changed its name in French to a French idiom. The directors of one international corporation chose its quintessentially supernational name, **EXON**, when advertisers argued that it was a phonetically meaningless sound, unobjectionable to most linguistic groups. **EXON** was supposed by zealous advertisers to have the tendency of inscribing internationally the supposedly blank slates (*tabulae rasae*) of the spirits of nations not only with a new letter (**X**) but also with a new rhetorically powerful superword.

The study of the political power of brand names and of their peculiar definition of genus and species must focus not only on their movement into ordinary languages, but also on their movement, even in a unilingual country, from the linguistic to the supposedly superlinguistic level. In bilingual Québec, the superlinguistic aspect of the language of commodities and the masquerade of brand name mediators as being superior to English and French have specific ideological tendencies. We have seen that the semiotic mediator in a bilingual advertisement is a nucleus or focal point of the advertisement, especially when readers are bilingual (and so read both messages), or when the mediating symbol is centrally located or more brightly colored or larger than the other semiotic units on the sign. Bilingual advertisement often tends to enhance the mediator with the intellectual privileges of presenting the most important part of the message of the advertisement and of conjoining two ordinarily separate languages. The mediator “serves as a measure which makes linguistically different messages commensurable and so reduces them to equality.”⁶⁵ A mediator is a universal equivalent standing in a relation to the words it translates like the relation of money to the commodities it exchanges. The

translating mediator as semiotic unit (in addition to the thing which this unit is supposed to signify) is a kind of equalizing agent among languages. The curious sign "APT MEDARD APT" (see fig. 3-xii), for example, would equalize subliminally "appartement" and "apartment." Similarly, "ENJOY COCA-COLA RAFRAÎCHISSANT" would equalize "enjoy" and "rafraîchissant," words both linguistically and syntactically different. Such mediators are supposed by many (as we have suggested) to rise above and solve (by an act of translation or linguistic equalization) a political problem implied by the antagonism between two linguistically different messages. In bilingual Québec, the capacity of the language of wares so to equalize (on the ideal plane) tends to create a society in which "the only comprehensible language which we [English and French human beings] can speak to each other or which can mediate between us, is [not that of ourselves, but] of our commodities in their mutual relations."⁶⁶ Or so it seems. Even more in a bilingual than a unilingual country, it is apparently not we who speak with each other about commodities, but rather ventriloquistic commodities that speak a unique and alien *Warensprache* through us.⁶⁷

Commercial advertisement employs a verbal trope (e.g., a translating mediator from one language to another) in order to precipitate a commercial exchange (e.g., a transfer of commodity from seller to buyer). The relation between tropic exchanges of meaning and economic exchanges of commodities implies a major social role for advertisement. Unlike the epigram, which turns our attention to contemplating a thing, commercial advertisement turns our attention to purchasing a thing. The advertisement pretends that it is a call to action, but purchase, the action to which it directs us and which it presents as a salve for the wound of desire, is an unproductive exchange. The most insidious ideological tendency of modern commercial advertising is not the witting lie, but rather the often unwitting tendency, tellingly emphasized in bilingual advertisement, to suggest that linguistic and political problems are solvable by economic consumption.⁶⁸ This tendency, often praised by advocates of "consumer society," ignores the fact that language and advertising (which is a part of language) are more properly ideal political productions than commodities.

The interlinguistic mediator in bilingual advertising in Québec is a telling symptom of the ideological tendencies of the language of commerce and advertisement in general. Nowadays, however, mediated bilingual advertising is infrequently practiced. Most new signs contain linguistically separate, unilingual or nonverbal messages, despite the fact that mediation distinguishes a brand name and economizes on space. Many forces may help to explain this demise of the commercial and noncommercial FrAnglais mediator. So-called separatism, for example, associates national liberation with linguistically separate or unilingual messages; and consumerism associates consumer protection with wholly independent or unmediated messages.⁶⁹ Federal studies of biculturalism, which might be expected to encourage bilingual advertising, have failed even to notice interlinguistic mediation, and so seem, like reports from nineteenth-century colonial administrators, to

certify or approve a supposedly unavoidable war between two nations.⁷⁰ The language of commodities continues to monopolize ever more immediately the life and thought of both English and French Canadians. It is sad that interlinguistic mediation, which reveals as well as conceals that monopoly, continues to be ignored or attacked by those who do not understand that the forked tongue of advertisement in Québec is not bilingual but rather commercial.