

in brief...

Mother tongue: the economics of language learning

In cities where two or more languages are widely spoken, what determines whether people whose mother tongue is a minority language are willing to learn the majority language? **Javier Ortega** and **Gregory Verdugo** look at the drivers of language assimilation in the English- and French-majority cities of Canada.

In bilingual countries like Canada, there are often heated debates about the role of languages. This may be because it is rare for bilingualism to be purely symmetric (one language tends to be dominant) or because of fears that over time fewer people will speak the non-dominant language. What's more, if the population of a bilingual country grows through immigration, the choices that immigrants make about learning either or both of the national languages may alter the balance between them.

The case of Canada is particularly interesting. A majority of Canadian residents have English as their mother tongue (nearly three fifths, according to the 2006 census), but native francophones constitute an important group (more than a fifth) and French is the majority language in certain parts of the country. What's more, around a sixth of Canadian residents have neither English nor French as their mother tongue – they are 'allophones' – and this proportion varies widely across the country.

Among English-majority cities, Ottawa has a large francophone minority (nearly a third) and a relatively small proportion of allophones (less than a sixth). In contrast, Toronto is characterised by a large allophone minority (more than a third) and a tiny francophone minority (not much more than one in a hundred). Across French-majority cities, Quebec City is overwhelmingly francophone (95%) while an eighth of Montreal's residents are anglophones and more than a sixth of them are allophones.

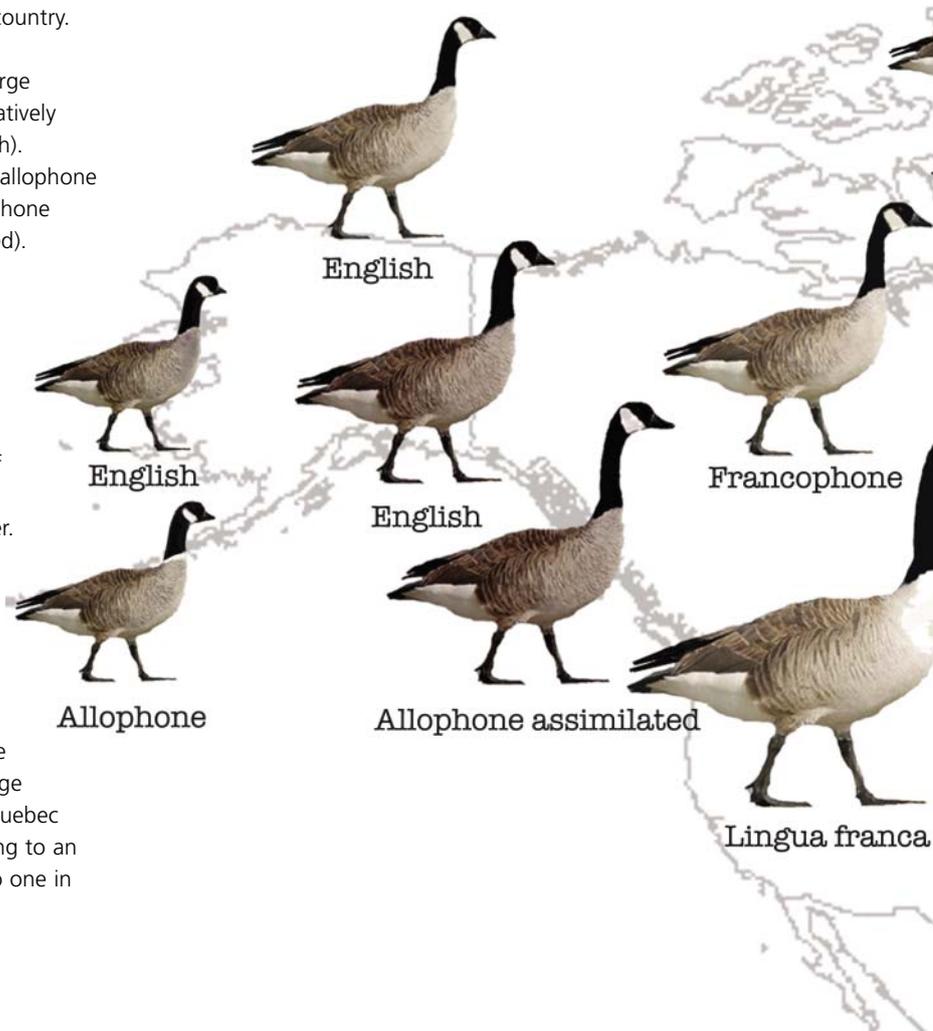
In the past, legislation has had the clear aim of encouraging immigrants or minorities to adopt one of the two languages rather than the other. For example, provincial educational acts after 1867 banned the use of French as a medium of instruction in state schools and stopped funding French-speaking schools except in Quebec and Ontario.

Even after the 1969 Official Language Act gave official co-status to English and French, language issues remained politically sensitive. In 1977, Quebec passed a law that prevented children from going to an English school unless their parents had been to one in

Quebec. While this legislation has been partly overturned, the children of immigrants in Quebec can still only attend schools that teach in French.

From an economic viewpoint, learning a language is an investment that pays whenever the financial or time costs are covered by the returns to the investment. Assuming that enough economic transactions take place within a city, we would expect the returns to learning the majority language for a minority resident to be higher when the majority language is more widely spoken and lower if the minority language is widely spoken.

At the same time, if some economic transactions take place at a national or wider level, we would expect that in Canada, more people would learn English than French. After all, English is the country's majority language and the world's current *lingua franca*.



Francophone Canadians assimilate into English-majority cities more than anglophones into French-majority cities

Using data from the 2001 and 2006 censuses, we make use of the variation in the language composition of Canadian cities to study the determinants of the assimilation of minority language speakers into a city's majority language – whether they are allophones, francophones in English-majority cities or anglophones in French-majority cities.

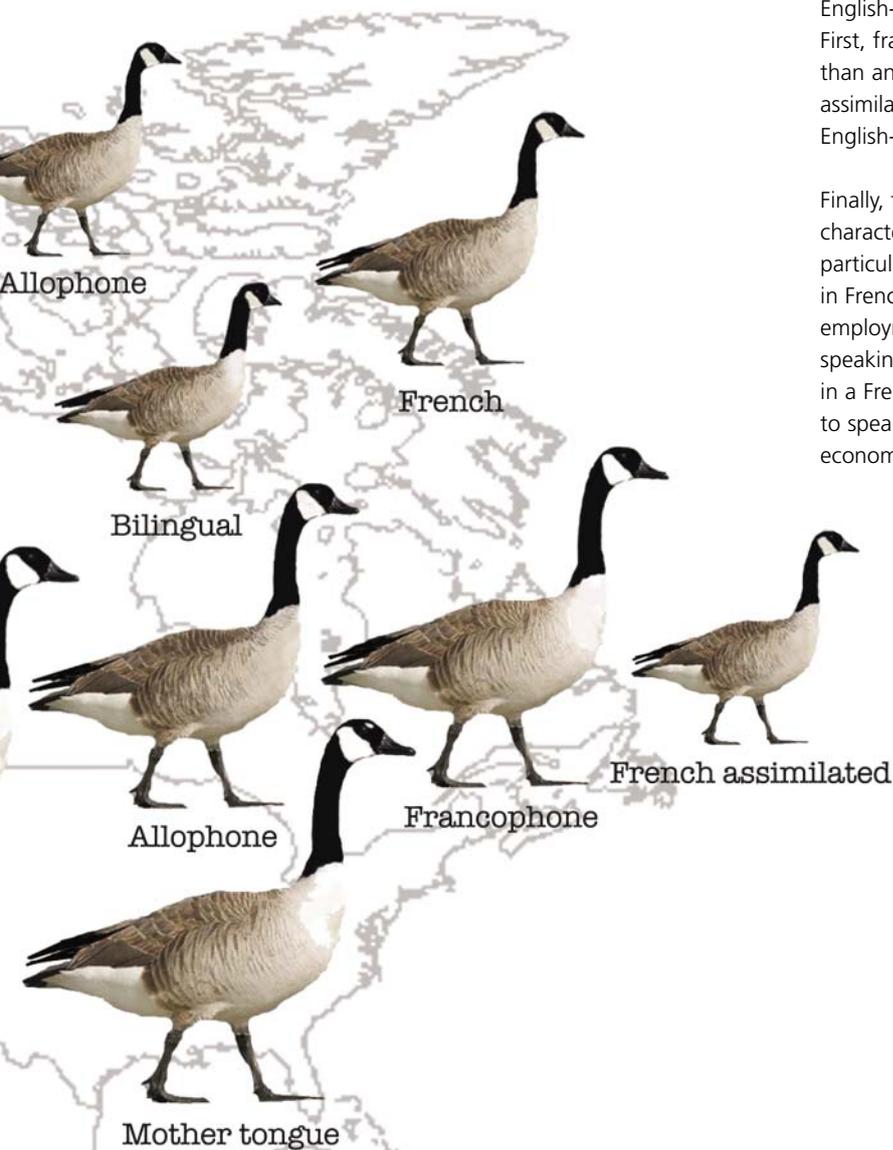
Our research shows that official mother tongue speakers who are in a minority in a city assimilate less into the city's majority language than allophones. This could arise from the institutions of Canada's official bilingualism, such as the right for Canadian citizens whose mother tongue is English or French to get education in that same

language everywhere in Canada (when the number of children so warrants).

The language composition of cities is an important factor behind the assimilation of allophones in both types of city. Specifically, allophones are more likely to speak the city's majority language the larger the population share of majority language speakers and the smaller the number of speakers of their own mother tongue. Similarly, official minorities are more likely to speak the majority language the smaller their own group.

Our research also finds that assimilation into French in French-majority cities and assimilation into English in English-majority cities are asymmetric in several respects. First, francophones assimilate into English more than anglophones into French. Second, allophone assimilation is lower in French-majority cities than in English-majority cities.

Finally, the impact on assimilation of several individual characteristics varies across the two types of city. In particular, the likelihood of anglophones speaking French in French-majority cities is more sensitive to their employment status than the likelihood of francophones speaking English in English-majority cities: if anglophones in a French-majority city are in work, they are more likely to speak French. This is a further indication of the economics that underlies the decision to learn a language.



This article summarises 'Assimilation in Multilingual Cities' by Javier Ortega and Gregory Verdugo, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1110 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1110.pdf>).

Javier Ortega is a senior lecturer in economics at City University London and a research economist in CEP's labour markets programme. **Gregory Verdugo** is a research fellow at the Banque de France.