

Going Viral: Shopping sociolinguistic research to the media and to the community

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Though Canada is an officially bilingual country, the language “problem” remains recalcitrant. Its poster child is lexical borrowing, especially from English into French, giving rise to the dreaded *anglicismes*, widely held to lead to the deterioration, if not death, of the recipient language. No surprise then that we at the uOttawa Sociolinguistics Lab have devoted decades to studying various facets of this issue, with a particular focus on the effects of language mixing on the grammars of the languages in contact. The results of a recently published synthesis of this work (Poplack, *Borrowing: loanwords in the speech community and in the grammar*; OUP 2018), were diffused by the University of Ottawa via a targeted media campaign, which in turn triggered intense interest from journalists. This led to a front-page story in the *Globe and Mail* (the Canadian NYT), a CBC News write-up (shared 2700 times), and radio and television interviews broadcast on 22 stations, including BBC World Service and Radio-Canada International. A university-produced video garnered over 2000 YouTube views. For us, and likely for many other sociolinguists, this has been one of the all-too rare occasions where the (rather technical) results of variationist sociolinguistic research have really hit a nerve with the public.

Headlines, like “Sociolinguistique: le français et le chiac ‘sauvés par la science’”, “English invasions of French short-lived, linguist finds” and “Le français ne menacerait pas le français”, were uniformly positive. But the public response, expressed via Facebook posts and shares, (re)tweets, Reddit threads and blog posts, was deeply polarized. In this session, we wanted to share our experience of engaging with the media and the public, in the hopes of sparking a discussion on the role (and responsibility) of the sociolinguist in public discourse. We propose to first give a brief overview of the actual sociolinguistic findings, then show how these were distilled by the media for popular consumption, and discuss how they were subsequently interpreted by stakeholders.

For example, ongoing content analysis of the nearly 4000 responses we have tracked to date reveals a significant difference in propensity to accept the message (that (lexical borrowings adopt the grammatical structure of the recipient language, and as such do not alter it) which closely mirrors the sociopolitical divide between Francophones and Anglophones prevailing in Canada. Responses written in English are nearly twice as likely to be positive as those written in French (the minority language), while nearly 2/3 of the latter explicitly dismiss the results, which remarkably, are interpreted to mean exactly the *opposite* of what was found. We review the sociopolitical factors that led to the perception that these linguistic findings were newsworthy in the first place, illustrate how individual allegiances color the interpretation of scientific results, and explore whether -- and how! -- sociolinguists can mediate among competing interpretations of their work.