

Catalogue no. 89-657-X2026004
ISSN 2371-5006
ISBN 978-0-660-98103-1

Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Thematic Series

The category “English and French” in the Census of Population language data: Insights from the 2022 Survey on the Official Language Minority Population

by Étienne Lemyre

Release date: July 16, 2026



Statistics
Canada

Statistique
Canada

Canada

How to obtain more information

For information about this product or the wide range of services and data available from Statistics Canada, visit our website, www.statcan.gc.ca.

You can also contact us by

Email at infostats@statcan.gc.ca

Telephone, from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the following numbers:

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| • Statistical Information Service | 1-800-263-1136 |
| • National telecommunications device for the hearing impaired | 1-800-363-7629 |
| • Fax line | 1-514-283-9350 |

Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner. To this end, the Agency has developed standards of service which its employees observe in serving its clients. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact Statistics Canada toll-free at 1-800-263-1136. The service standards are also published on www.statcan.gc.ca under “Contact us” > “Standards of service to the public”.

Note of appreciation

Canada owes the success of its statistical system to a long-standing partnership between Statistics Canada, the citizens of Canada, its businesses, governments and other institutions. Accurate and timely statistical information could not be produced without their continued co-operation and goodwill.

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of Industry, 2026

Use of this publication is governed by the Statistics Canada [Open Licence Agreement](#).

An [HTML version](#) is also available.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	4
What proficiency level corresponds to the ability to have a conversation in one’s second official language?.....	5
Among adults who regularly speak both official languages at home, how often do they speak these languages at home?.....	7
What are the characteristics of adults who report both official languages as their mother tongues?.....	9
Among adults who have English and French as their first official languages spoken, in which language do they feel most comfortable speaking?	10
Conclusion	12
References	13

The category “English and French” in the Census of Population language data: Insights from the 2022 Survey on the Official Language Minority Population

by Étienne Lemyre

Introduction

Canada’s Census of Population is one of the national censuses in the world with the most questions on language.¹ It collects detailed information on the languages that the Canadian population speaks, uses and knows through a variety of concepts, such as knowledge of official languages, language spoken at home, mother tongue, first official language spoken, language of work and language of instruction.

Interpreting certain language concepts from the census can become more complex where more than one language is known or used. For example, what does it mean to be able to have a conversation in both of Canada’s official languages (English and French) or to speak these two languages at home on a regular basis?

Using the 2022 Survey on the Official Language Minority Population (SOLMP), this research note intends to provide more information on English and French being reported simultaneously to language questions in the Census of Population by answering recurring questions on the interpretation of certain language concepts. Based on results for the adult English-speaking population in Quebec and the adult French-speaking population in Canada outside Quebec, this note answers the following questions:

- What proficiency level corresponds to the ability to have a conversation in one’s second official language?
- Among adults who regularly speak both official languages at home, how often do they speak these languages at home?
- What are the characteristics of adults who report both official languages as their mother tongues?
- Among adults who have English and French as their first official languages spoken, in which language are they most comfortable speaking?

While the SOLMP results presented in this note cover only adults from official language minority communities, they enhance our understanding of the census language concepts and paint a nuanced picture of Canada’s linguistic composition.

1. For example, the Canadian census includes more questions about language than the censuses of other Commonwealth countries. See Christopher (2010).

Survey on the Official Language Minority Population

The Survey on the Official Language Minority Population (SOLMP) is a postcensal survey that was conducted in 2022, following the 2021 Census. It was conducted among adults in the English-speaking population in Quebec and adults in the French-speaking population in Canada outside Quebec.² The survey included questions about respondents’ language trajectory, skills, use and preferences.

More specifically, the SOLMP included the same questions about knowledge of official languages, mother tongue and language spoken at home as in the Census of Population. There were also related questions about language proficiency, the frequency of use of languages at home, and the linguistic trajectories of adults since childhood. As a result, the SOLMP results provide context to the responses to the language questions in the Census of Population.

More information on the SOLMP and its content is available in the document [Survey on the Official Language Minority Population: User guide, 2022 \(2025 revisions\)](#).

What proficiency level corresponds to the ability to have a conversation in one’s second official language?

In the Census of Population, a person knows an official language when they report that they know it well enough to conduct a conversation.³ Individuals who consider themselves able to conduct a conversation in English and French are classified as bilingual in English and French.

According to census data, English–French bilingualism is very common among minority language adults. In 2021, 69.4% of English-mother-tongue adults⁴ in Quebec reported being able to conduct a conversation in French, and 91.6% of French-mother-tongue adults in Canada outside Quebec reported being able to conduct a conversation in English.

There has been some criticism of the results on knowledge of languages, which are based on information reported by respondents themselves, as some people could overestimate their proficiency level.⁵ In the Census of Population, what proficiency level corresponds to the ability to conduct a conversation in a language?

Like the results of other surveys,⁶ the results of the SOLMP show that almost all minority language adults who self-assessed their oral proficiency in their second official language as being high or very high felt capable of conducting a conversation in that language. The same was true for about two-thirds of those who rated their oral proficiency in their second official language as fair,⁷ with no difference between Quebec and the Canada outside Quebec.

In other words, with self-reported oral skills being equal, adults with an English mother tongue from Quebec and adults with a French mother tongue outside Quebec were equally likely to consider themselves able to conduct a conversation in their second official language.⁸ The results from the question on knowledge of official languages and the questions on language proficiency based on an ordinal scale are therefore consistent.

2. In addition to information on adults in the official language minority population, the Survey on the Official Language Minority Population also collected information on the children of minority language adults and on children eligible for education in the minority official language.

3. The help text for the question on knowledge of official languages in the Census of Population states that it refers to the ability to conduct a conversation “of some length on various topics.”

4. Unless otherwise indicated, the results in this note for adults whose mother tongue is English or French are based solely on single mother tongue responses.

5. See, for example, Tomoschuk, Ferreira and Gollan (2018).

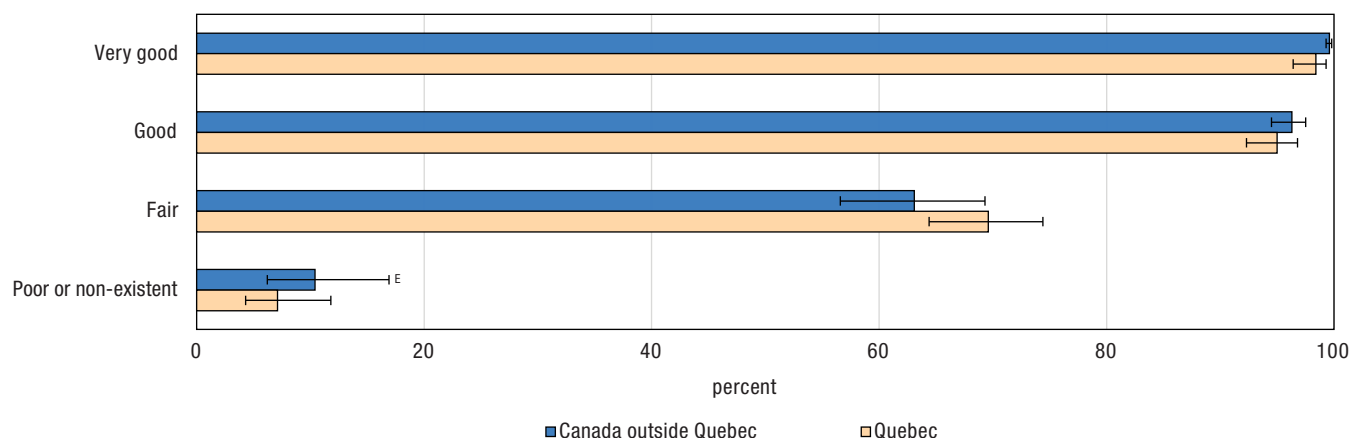
6. The results of the 2011 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies also indicate that a large proportion of individuals in a minority situation who could conduct a conversation in their second official language had a good or very good ability to speak that language (Corbeil and Marcoux, 2023). A few decades earlier, a comparative analysis of the 1986 General Social Survey and the 1988 National Census Test showed that the proportion of the population who reported they could conduct a conversation in a language was similar to the proportion who reported having a good ability to speak that language (Statistics Canada, 1989). Furthermore, the fact that individuals who report being able to conduct a conversation in a language in the census consider themselves to have a high level of proficiency in that language has also been highlighted for the Inuktitut language through the Indigenous Peoples Survey. See Fernandes, Arriagada and Lemyre (2024).

7. The results are the same when examining the ability to conduct a conversation based on the level of comprehension of the second language. However, adults who rated their comprehension of their second language as fair were somewhat less likely than adults who rated their oral proficiency as fair to feel that they could conduct a conversation in that language.

8. This statement is still accurate even when considering the language in which the SOLMP questionnaire was completed.

Chart 1**Proportion of adults in Quebec with an English mother tongue and adults in Canada outside Quebec with a French mother tongue who could conduct a conversation in their second official language, by self-assessed level of oral proficiency, 2022**

Oral proficiency in the second official language

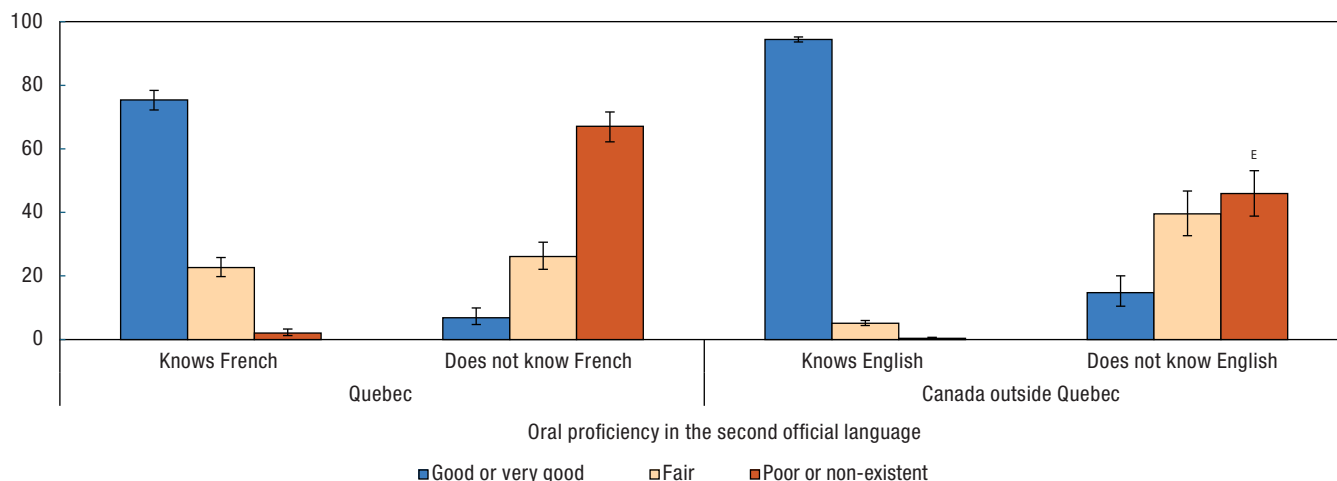
^E To be used with caution

Note: French is the second official language of adults in Quebec with an English mother tongue, while English is the second official language of adults in Canada outside Quebec with a French mother tongue.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

Chart 2**Self-assessed level of oral proficiency in the second official language of adults in Quebec with an English mother tongue and adults in Canada outside Quebec with a French mother tongue, by knowledge of their second official language, 2022**

percent

^E To be used with caution

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

In Canada outside Quebec, the vast majority (94%) of adults whose mother tongue is French and who felt they could conduct a conversation in their second official language rated their oral proficiency in that language as good or very good. This was the case for 75% of adults with an English mother tongue who felt they were able to conduct a conversation in French. In fact, bilingual adults with English as their mother tongue in Quebec were more likely to rate their oral proficiency in their second official language as fair (23%) than bilingual adults with French as their mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec (5%).

Moreover, some adults who feel they cannot conduct a conversation in their second official language still believe they can somewhat understand or speak that language.⁹ For example, more than two-thirds (64%¹⁰) of adults with a French mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec who did not consider themselves able to conduct a conversation in English still rated their understanding of the language as at least fair. In Quebec, nearly half (45%) of adults with an English mother tongue who felt they could not conduct a conversation in French believed they had at least a fair level of understanding of the language.

Among adults who regularly speak both official languages at home, how often do they speak these languages at home?

In the Census of Population, individuals report the languages they speak at home on a regular basis.¹¹ People who speak more than one language at home must then indicate which language is spoken most often.¹² What does it mean to regularly speak a language as a secondary language while speaking another language more often? Do adults who speak both official languages at home speak them every day?

Use of Canada’s two official languages at home is common among official language minority populations. In 2021, 16.8% of adults with an English mother tongue in Quebec spoke English and French at home at least on a regular basis,¹³ and 25.2% of adults with a French mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec spoke English and French at home at least on a regular basis.

As suggested by a previous survey,¹⁴ the results of the SOLMP illustrate that a large majority of minority language adults who speak English and French at home at least on a regular basis use both languages daily.¹⁵ However, the daily use of French was somewhat less widespread than the daily use of English. In Canada outside Quebec, 94% of adults with a French mother tongue who spoke English and French at home on a regular basis spoke English at home every day, while 83% of the same adults spoke French at home every day. These proportions were not significantly different among adults with an English mother tongue in Quebec.

The gap between the rates of daily use of English and French is due in part to adults who spoke English most often and French regularly as a secondary language at home. Among French-mother-tongue adults in this situation in Canada outside Quebec, 61%¹⁶ spoke French at home daily. In most cases, adults who spoke a language regularly at home but did not speak it daily spoke it a few times a week.

9. There can be a number of reasons why individuals who believe they have a high level of oral proficiency or comprehension in their second official language feel they cannot conduct a conversation in that language. For example, language anxiety could lead some people to underestimate their abilities. See MacIntyre, Noels and Clément (1997).

10. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

11. The languages spoken at home reported in the census must exclude languages used only at work for people who work from home. Individuals who live alone must report the language in which they feel most comfortable.

12. Two or more languages can be spoken most often at home if they are spoken equally as often.

13. Alone or in combination with a non-official language. Furthermore, a similar proportion of adults in Quebec with a non-official language as their mother tongue spoke English and French at home at least regularly (15.9%). In Canada outside Quebec, this proportion was lower (1.1%).

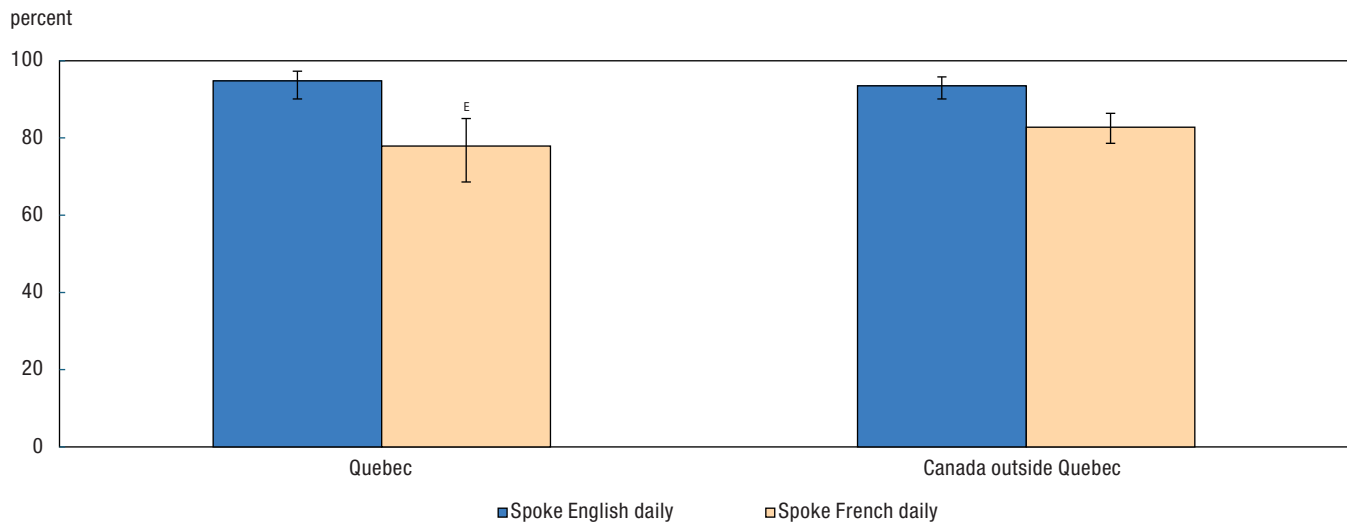
14. In the 2006 Survey on the Vitality of Official-Language Minorities, it was also observed that the languages spoken at home on a regular basis were generally spoken daily. See Lachapelle and Lepage (2010).

15. Among adults who were living in a household with two or more people.

16. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

Chart 3

Among adults in Quebec with an English mother tongue and adults in Canada outside Quebec with a French mother tongue who speak English and French at home at least regularly, proportion who spoke those languages daily at home, 2022



^E To be used with caution

Note: Among adults in a household with two or more people.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

When English or French was the language spoken most often at home, almost all minority language adults spoke either of these languages at home every day. The same was true for adults who spoke English and French most often equally: almost all of them spoke both languages at home every day.¹⁷

The SOLMP results also shed light on the use of languages at home with other members of the household by adults with French as their mother tongue who spoke French and English regularly at home in Canada outside Quebec.¹⁸ Among these adults who were living in a couple,¹⁹ 60%²⁰ spoke both official languages with their spouse or partner, while others spoke only French (14%) or only English (25%) with them.²¹ This suggests that for many adults living in a couple who regularly speak both official languages at home, one of the two languages may only be spoken with people who do not live in the same household.²²

In comparison, almost all French-mother-tongue adults who spoke English and French at home and who were living with their spouse or partner and children spoke English and French with at least one other member of their household. In Canada outside Quebec, these adults with a French mother tongue were more likely to speak French at home with their children (94%) than English (66%).²³ Conversely, they were more likely to speak English with their spouse or partner (86%) than French (52%).²⁴²⁵

17. Most adults who spoke both of Canada's official languages equally often at home felt more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue than in their second official language, or felt as comfortable speaking in both languages. In Canada outside Quebec, only 15% of these adults with French as their mother tongue felt more comfortable speaking English than French.

18. Due to small numbers, a comparable analysis among adults with an English mother tongue in Quebec cannot be carried out.

19. That is, adults who were living in a household with their spouse or partner with no other people in the household.

20. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

21. The results were similar for French-mother-tongue adults who spoke English and French at home regularly and whose spouse or partner had French as their mother tongue, except that the proportion of adults who spoke only English at home with their spouse was lower (8%) for this type of couple.

22. For example, this could arise if a person regularly has visits from family members with whom they speak a different language from the one they speak with their spouse or partner.

23. The results were similar when the spouse or partner had an English mother tongue.

24. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

25. Among adults whose spouse or partner had an English mother tongue, almost all spoke English with their partner, and a smaller proportion spoke French with them (21%).

What are the characteristics of adults who report both official languages as their mother tongues?

In the Census of Population, a person’s mother tongue is the language that was learned first at home in childhood and still understood at the time the data were collected.²⁶ A person can have two mother tongues if both languages were learned simultaneously at home before going to school. It has been shown that children can grow up learning more than one language simultaneously.²⁷

Although it has increased in recent censuses, the proportion of the Canadian population who reported having more than one mother tongue is nevertheless small. For example, in 2021, 1.2% of adults in Quebec and 0.5% of adults in Canada outside Quebec had English and French as their mother tongues. Individuals who report having more than one mother tongue in a given census are unlikely to do so again in the next census.²⁸

In the approaches aimed at categorizing the Canadian population into linguistic groups, individuals with English and French as their mother tongues can be categorized entirely or partially into the “English” or the “French” group, which can change our understanding of Canada’s linguistic composition.²⁹ Therefore, information about the characteristics of adults with English and French as their mother tongues is useful for interpreting this category.

The SOLMP results show that the majority of adults in Canada with English and French as their mother tongues learned these languages in childhood before starting school (82%). In contrast, only 27% of minority language adults who learned English and French in their childhood before starting school reported having these languages as their mother tongues. These results indicate that although learning both official languages from early childhood is common in the official language minority population, the languages are not necessarily learned simultaneously, as most adults who learned both English and French in childhood before starting school identify only one language as their first language learned.

In Canada, minority language adults from mixed English–French families,³⁰ consisting of one parent with English as their mother tongue and one with French as their mother tongue, were much more likely to have both English and French as their mother tongues (25%) than adults from families where both parents had the same mother tongue (2%). Moreover, three-quarters of minority language adults from mixed English–French families had a single official language as their mother tongue.³¹

In Canada, among adults who have English and French as their mother tongues, over two-thirds were from mixed English–French families (71%). Adults from families with two parents whose mother tongue is French represented one-sixth of the group (17%).³² There was no significant difference between Quebec and Canada outside Quebec in the distribution of adults with English and French as their mother tongues by the language composition of their parents.

In Quebec, about two-thirds of adults who had English and French as their mother tongues felt equally comfortable speaking English and French (67%),³³ while this proportion was more than three times lower (19%) among those for whom English was their only mother tongue. In Canada outside Quebec, adults who had both English and French as their mother tongues were much more likely to feel more comfortable speaking in English (54%) than adults whose only mother tongue was French (25%).³⁴

26. If the person no longer understands the first language learned in childhood, they must indicate the second language learned. Over time, some people who rarely use their mother tongue may no longer understand it. No longer being able to speak and understand one’s mother tongue is more common in minority French-language communities and among second-generation immigrants. See Lepage (2011).

27. See Genesee (2015).

28. The phenomenon has been documented across several censuses using data linkage. As a result, multiple mother tongue responses have been described as “very unstable and unreliable.” See Houle and Corbeil (2011).

29. See Lepage (2020).

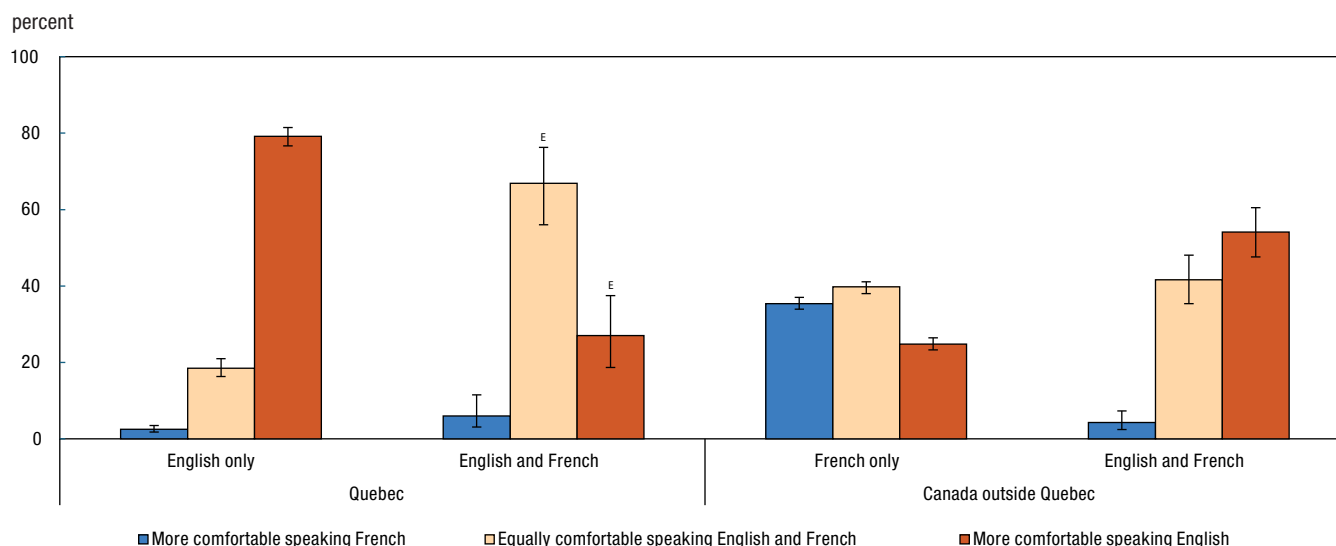
30. Among adults whose parents’ mother tongue is known.

31. Adults with only the majority official language as their mother tongue are excluded from the denominator, as these individuals were not included in the SOLMP. For example, some adults from mixed English–French families in Canada outside Quebec have only English as their mother tongue.

32. For example, this could include adults whose parents with French as their mother tongue spoke English most often at home.

33. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

34. This was also true among young adults under 35 years.

Chart 4**Language in which adults felt most comfortable speaking, by mother tongue, Quebec and Canada outside Quebec, 2022**

^E To be used with caution

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

Among adults who have English and French as their first official languages spoken, in which language do they feel most comfortable speaking?

First official language spoken is a concept derived from the questions on knowledge of official languages, mother tongue and the language spoken most often at home. This concept is intended to classify the Canadian population into two distinct official language groups,³⁵ namely the “English” group and the “French” group. However, some people cannot be classified into either of these groups, as it is not possible to determine which of the two official languages is their first language using the three census questions on which the concept is based. These people are therefore in the “English and French” or “neither English nor French” group. In 2021, individuals whose first official languages spoken were English and French were primarily bilingual English–French with a non-official language as their mother tongue who predominantly spoke that non-official language at home.³⁶

In 2021, 13.2% of adults in Quebec had only English as their first official language spoken, while 3.7% had both English and French as their first official languages spoken.³⁷ In Canada outside Quebec, 3.5% of adults had only French as their first official language spoken, and 0.4% had both official languages as their first official languages spoken.

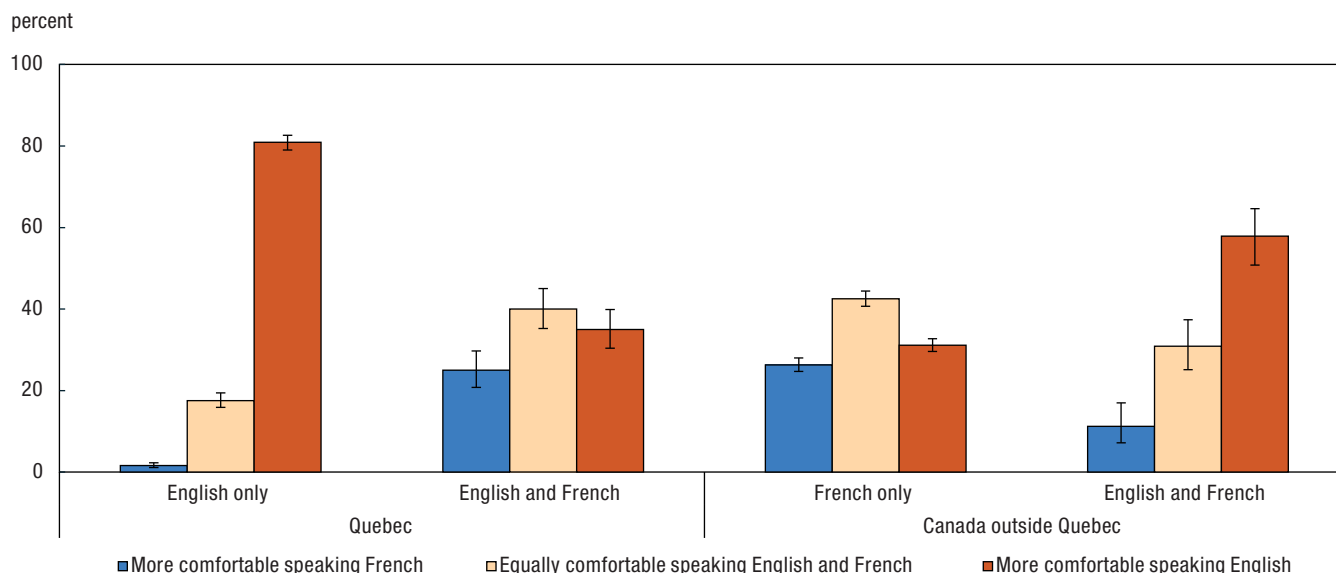
There are several ways to address the “English and French” group of first official language spoken. One way to do this is to distribute this category evenly between the two official language groups, that is, to assign half of the members of the “English and French” group to the “English” group and the other half to the “French” group.³⁸ But does this equal distribution reflect the languages in which adults with English and French as their first official languages spoken are most comfortable speaking, or the linguistic group with which these adults identify?

35. From 1991 to 2019, the first official language spoken was used under the *Official Languages Act* to measure the demand for official languages in communications and services to the public.

36. In 2021, this group represented 73.8% of adults in Canada outside Quebec and 76.2% of adults in Quebec whose first official languages spoken were English and French.

37. This proportion was higher among certain groups and in certain regions (e.g., 22.2% of adults with a non-official mother tongue in Quebec and 8.5% of adults on Montréal Island).

38. See Lepage (2020).

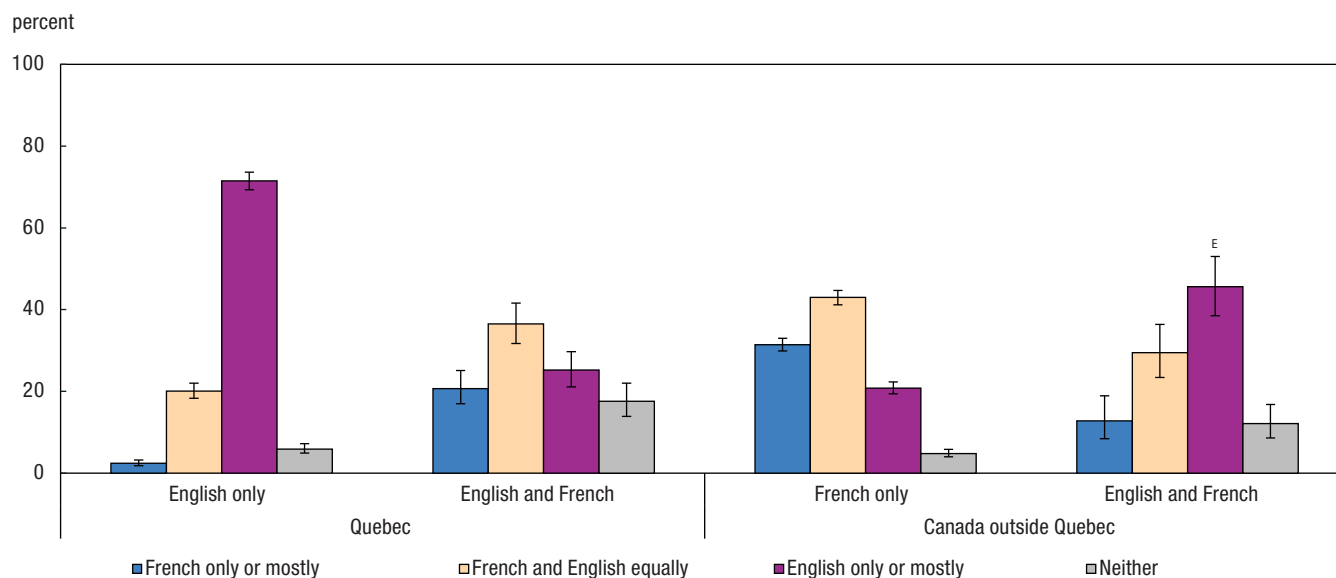
Chart 5**Language in which adults felt most comfortable speaking, by first official language spoken, Quebec and Canada outside Quebec, 2022**

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

The SOLMP results show that in Canada outside Quebec, adults with English and French as their first official languages spoken were much more likely to be more comfortable speaking English (58%) than speaking French (11%). This was also observed in Quebec, although to a lesser extent (35% compared with 25%).

Similar results were observed for identification with language groups in Canada outside Quebec. Adults with English and French as their first official languages spoken were more likely to identify primarily or exclusively with the “English” group (46%³⁹) than with the “French” group (13%). However, this type of gap was not observed in Quebec.

39. This percentage should be interpreted with caution as the width of the confidence interval is greater than 14 percentage points or its calculation is based on small numbers.

Chart 6**Language group with which adults identify, by first official language spoken, Quebec and Canada outside Quebec, 2022**^E To be used with caution

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey on the Official Language Minority Population, 2022.

Conclusion

The Census of Population is the most complete and comprehensive source of data on the languages known and spoken by the Canadian population. The SOLMP results presented in this note aim to provide insights into the census results on Canada's linguistic composition.

Among minority language adults,

- most who report that they can conduct a conversation in their second official language consider their oral proficiency in that language to be high or very high;
- the languages spoken at home on a regular basis are generally spoken daily;
- most who have English and French as their mother tongues learned both languages in childhood and are from linguistically mixed families.

Furthermore, adults who have both English and French as their first official languages spoken are more likely to feel more comfortable speaking in English than in French, especially in Canada outside Quebec.

This research note is based on results that cover minority language adults. It would also be worthwhile to confirm some of the results in this note on the ability to conduct a conversation in a second language and on the frequency with which languages are spoken at home among other language groups in Canada, including French-mother-tongue individuals in Quebec, English-mother-tongue individuals in Canada outside Quebec, and individuals with a non-official language as their mother tongue.

References

- Christopher, A. J. (2010). Questions of language in the commonwealth censuses. *Population, Space and Place*, 17(5), 534-549.
- Corbeil, J.-P. and R. Marcoux. (2023). “La capacité autodéclarée de soutenir une conversation en français : un indicateur utile et pertinent.” In J.P. Corbeil, R. Marcoux, and V. Piché (Eds.), *Le français en déclin? Repenser la francophonie québécoise*, 147–149. Montréal, QC: Del Busso Éditeurs.
- Fernandes, D., Arriagada, P. and Lemyre, É. (2024). Languages in Nunavut, 2021. *Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Thematic Series*.
- Genesee, F. (2015). Myths about early childhood bilingualism. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie canadienne*, 56(1), 6–15.
- Houle, R. and Corbeil, J.-P. (2011). Methodological Document on the 2011 Census Language Data. *Census: Language*.
- Lachapelle, R. and Lepage, J.F. (2010). Languages in Canada, 2006 Census. *New Canadian Perspectives*.
- Lepage, J.-F. (2011). “L’oubli de la langue maternelle : les données linguistiques du recensement sous-estiment-elles les transferts linguistiques?” *Quebec Journal of Demography*, 40(1), 61–85.
- Lepage, J.-F. (2020). Interpreting and presenting census language data. *Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Thematic Series*.
- MacIntyre, P. D., Noels, K. A. and Clément, R. (1997). Biases in self-ratings of second language proficiency: the role of language anxiety. *Language learning*, 47(2), 265-287.
- Statistics Canada (1989). Questions linguistiques: analyse des résultats et recommandations. *Test du recensement national*.
- Tomoschuk, B., Ferreira, V. S. and Gollan, T. H. (2018). When a seven is not a seven: Self-ratings of bilingual language proficiency differ between and within language populations. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 22(3), 516-536.