

Census in Brief

French and the *francophonie* in Canada



Language, 2011 Census of Population

The responses to the language questions in the 2011 Census of Population make it possible to examine the multifaceted concept of *francophonie*¹ and the presence of French in Canada. An overview of the statistics on mother tongue,² reported ability to conduct a conversation in French, language spoken at home and first official language spoken³ paints a basic picture of the four key indicators and measures of the presence of French in Canada and in each province or territory.⁴

Close to 10 million Canadians said they can speak French

In 2011, close to 10 million people reported being able to conduct a conversation in French, compared with less than 9.6 million in 2006.⁵ However, the proportion of those being able to speak French declined slightly to 30.1% in 2011, from 30.7% five years earlier.

In 2011, approximately 7.3 million people reported French as their mother tongue in Canada and 7.9 million spoke French at home at least on a regular basis. The number of people with French as their first official language spoken increased from 7.4 million in 2006 to 7.7 million in 2011 ([Table 1](#)).⁶

Although the number of persons who reported French as their mother tongue rose by almost 328,000 between 2006 and 2011, their proportion of the overall Canadian population decreased slightly from 22.3% to 22.0%.⁷ Similarly, the number of people who spoke French most often at home increased, but the relative share of this population fell slightly from 21.7% to 21.5%. Lastly, the proportion of the population with French as its first official language spoken also declined from 23.6% to 23.2%.

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1. According to the *Grand dictionnaire terminologique de l'Office québécois de la langue française*, the concept of *francophonie* refers to a population for whom French constitutes the mother tongue, the common language, the official language of its country or for whom French is historically or culturally significant.
 2. The 'mother tongue' refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood at the time of the census.
 3. The variable 'first official language spoken' was developed by Statistics Canada in 1989 at the request of the federal government to estimate the potential demand for government services in either official language. Statistics Canada proposed two methods (Methods I and II) of estimating the first official language spoken. Method I was adopted in the *Official Languages (Communications with and Services to the Public) Regulations*. According to Method I, the first official language spoken is derived successively from the responses to the questions on knowledge of official languages, mother tongue and language spoken most often at home. For more information, see *Population Estimates by First Official Language Spoken*, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division and Language Studies, 1989.
 4. There is no single criterion to define *francophonie* or Francophone. Depending on the needs of data users, the 2011 Census provides information on various aspects of the population's linguistic practices and characteristics. The 2011 National Household Survey, the results of which will be released in 2013, includes two questions on the use of languages at work.
 5. Information for the 2011 Census came from 100% data, while information for earlier censuses came from 20% sample data.
 6. Except for data on the first official language spoken, the statistics presented in tables 1 to 7 are derived from single responses and all multiple responses mentioning French.
 7. See Box [Comparability of language data between censuses of population](#) for more information on the comparability of data from the 2011 Census with data from earlier censuses.

Table 1 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Canada, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	Canada			
	2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Mother tongue	6,970,405	22.3	7,298,180	22.0
Language spoken at home	7,463,665	23.9	7,892,195	23.8
Most often	6,777,665	21.7	7,115,100	21.5
On a regular basis	686,000	2.2	777,095	2.3
First official language spoken	7,370,350	23.6	7,691,705	23.2
Ability to conduct a conversation	9,590,700	30.7	9,960,590	30.1

Notes: The percentages in tables 1 to 7 indicate the proportion of the population, for the given geographical unit, with French as mother tongue, language spoken at home or first official language spoken, or with the ability to conduct a conversation in French. The percentages should therefore not be totalled.

Information for the 2011 Census of Population came from 100% data, while information for earlier censuses came from 20% sample data.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Little variation in Quebec

In Quebec, the proportion of the population that reported French as its mother tongue (alone or in combination with another language) decreased from 80.1% to 79.7% between 2006 and 2011 ([Table 2](#)).⁸ The proportion that reported speaking French most often at home was down slightly from 82.7% to 82.5%. The proportion that spoke French regularly as a secondary language increased slightly from 4.3% to 4.5%. The proportion able to speak French remained relatively stable, going from 94.5% to 94.4%.

Table 2 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Quebec, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	Quebec			
	2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Mother tongue	5,957,865	80.1	6,231,600	79.7
Language spoken at home	6,465,000	86.9	6,801,890	87.0
Most often	6,146,595	82.7	6,450,370	82.5
On a regular basis	318,405	4.3	351,520	4.5
First official language spoken	6,373,225	85.7	6,684,125	85.5
Ability to conduct a conversation	7,028,745	94.5	7,375,900	94.4

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

8. See Box [Comparability of language data between censuses of population](#) for more information on the comparability of data from the 2011 Census with data from earlier censuses.

Outside Quebec, more people reported French as their mother tongue

Outside Quebec, the number of people who reported French as their mother tongue⁹ was around 1,067,000 in 2011, compared with almost 1,013,000 in 2006 ([Table 3](#)). This is an increase of 54,000 persons, despite a decrease in proportion from 4.3% to 4.2%.¹⁰

The use of French at home also grew between 2006 and 2011 (from 998,700 to 1,090,300) among those who reported it as their primary language (spoken most often) or secondary language (spoken on a regular basis). In terms of proportion, there was a slight decrease from 2.7% to 2.6% in the first group and a slight increase from 1.5% to 1.7% in the second group. Lastly, the number of people with French as their first official language spoken was 1,007,580 in 2011, compared with 997,125 in 2006, an increase of more than 10,000 people. This population's proportion fell from 4.2% to 4.0% during the period.¹¹

Table 3 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Canada outside Quebec, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	Canada outside Quebec			
	2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Mother tongue	1,012,540	4.3	1,066,580	4.2
Language spoken at home	998,665	4.2	1,090,305	4.3
Most often	631,070	2.7	664,730	2.6
On a regular basis	367,595	1.5	425,575	1.7
First official language spoken	997,125	4.2	1,007,580	4.0
Ability to conduct a conversation	2,561,955	10.8	2,584,690	10.2

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Outside Quebec, over three-quarters of those who speak French at home live in New Brunswick or Ontario

In 2011, 77% of those outside Quebec who reported speaking French at home (most often or on a regular basis) lived in New Brunswick or Ontario. The number of people who spoke French at home was 596,000 in Ontario and 245,000 in New Brunswick ([Table 4](#)). Depending on the language characteristic, there was little change between 2006 and 2011 in Ontario, except for a decrease in the proportion of persons able to conduct a conversation in French. In New Brunswick, the share of French has declined somewhat, regardless of the characteristic.

9. Alone or in combination with another language.

10. The comparability of data from 2006 and 2011 has certain limitations, which probably moderates the downward trend of French between 2006 and 2011, especially for the variables mother tongue and language spoken at home. See Box [Comparability of language data between censuses of population](#) for more information.

11. Data from the 2011 National Household Survey, to be released in 2013, will provide information on the contribution of migration between Quebec and the rest of Canada to the growth of the French-speaking population outside Quebec.

Table 4 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, New Brunswick and Ontario, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	New Brunswick				Ontario			
	2006		2011		2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
Mother tongue	237,575	33.0	240,455	32.5	532,865	4.4	561,155	4.4
Language spoken at home	244,105	33.9	245,405	33.2	544,035	4.5	595,925	4.7
Most often	216,120	30.0	216,455	29.3	321,550	2.7	340,295	2.7
On a regular basis	27,985	3.9	28,950	3.9	222,485	1.8	255,630	2.0
First official language spoken	235,130	32.7	235,695	31.9	537,595	4.5	542,390	4.3
Ability to conduct a conversation	313,835	43.6	312,270	42.2	1,426,540	11.9	1,438,785	11.3

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Presence of French grew in Alberta and British Columbia

Of all the provinces, it was in Alberta that the growth rate of the population with French as a mother tongue or language spoken most often at home was the most important between 2006 and 2011 (Table 6). The number of people who reported having French as their mother tongue went from 68,435 to 81,085, an increase of nearly 13,000 persons or +18% since 2006. In addition, the number of people who reported speaking French most often at home was 32,400 in 2011, compared with 23,515 in 2006. In British Columbia, the growth rate of the population with French as their mother tongue or language spoken most often at home was +12% and +22% respectively. By comparison, these growth rates were +5% and +6% respectively in Ontario.¹²

12. Data from the 2011 National Household Survey, to be released 2013, will provide information on the share of migration from Quebec and other provinces in the growth of the French-speaking population in Alberta and British Columbia.

Table 5 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Maritime provinces, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Newfoundland and Labrador				
Mother tongue	2,230	0.4	3,020	0.6
Language spoken at home	3,080	0.6	4,290	0.8
Most often	825	0.2	1,435	0.3
On a regular basis	2,255	0.5	2,850	0.6
First official language spoken	1,935	0.4	2,100	0.4
Ability to conduct a conversation	23,765	4.7	23,580	4.6
Prince Edward Island				
Mother tongue	5,880	4.4	5,685	4.1
Language spoken at home	5,245	3.9	5,540	4.0
Most often	2,830	2.1	2,765	2.0
On a regular basis	2,415	1.8	2,775	2.0
First official language spoken	5,135	3.8	4,810	3.5
Ability to conduct a conversation	17,160	12.8	17,135	12.4
Nova Scotia				
Mother tongue	34,920	3.9	34,585	3.8
Language spoken at home	33,520	3.7	34,425	3.8
Most often	18,585	2.1	18,055	2.0
On a regular basis	14,935	1.7	16,370	1.8
First official language spoken	32,230	3.6	30,330	3.3
Ability to conduct a conversation	96,015	10.6	94,310	10.4

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Table 6 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Western provinces, 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	2006		2011		2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
	Manitoba				Saskatchewan			
Mother tongue	47,100	4.2	47,670	4.0	17,575	1.8	18,930	1.9
Language spoken at home	39,490	3.5	42,555	3.6	12,725	1.3	14,915	1.5
Most often	21,550	1.9	21,550	1.8	4,780	0.5	5,550	0.5
On a regular basis	17,940	1.6	21,005	1.8	7,945	0.8	9,365	0.9
First official language spoken	43,120	3.8	41,365	3.5	14,855	1.6	14,290	1.4
Ability to conduct a conversation	105,450	9.3	104,630	8.8	47,935	5.0	47,000	4.6
	Alberta				British Columbia			
Mother tongue	68,435	2.1	81,085	2.2	63,295	1.6	70,760	1.6
Language spoken at home	56,685	1.7	74,220	2.1	57,105	1.4	69,535	1.6
Most often	23,515	0.7	32,390	0.9	19,990	0.5	24,445	0.6
On a regular basis	33,170	1.0	41,830	1.2	37,115	0.9	45,090	1.0
First official language spoken	62,790	1.9	71,370	2.0	61,740	1.5	62,195	1.4
Ability to conduct a conversation	225,085	6.9	238,770	6.6	297,720	7.3	298,695	6.9

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Table 7 Number of people and proportion of the population reporting French by selected language characteristic, Territories , 2006 and 2011

Language characteristic	2006		2011	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
Yukon				
Mother tongue	1,225	4.1	1,630	4.8
Language spoken at home	1,270	4.2	1,720	5.1
Most often	615	2.0	945	2.8
On a regular basis	655	2.2	775	2.3
First official language spoken	1,185	3.9	1,485	4.4
Ability to conduct a conversation	3,550	11.8	4,505	13.4
Northwest Territories				
Mother tongue	1,030	2.5	1,165	2.8
Language spoken at home	985	2.4	1,265	3.1
Most often	475	1.2	610	1.5
On a regular basis	510	1.3	655	1.6
First official language spoken	1,005	2.5	1,080	2.6
Ability to conduct a conversation	3,725	9.1	3,760	9.2
Nunavut				
Mother tongue	410	1.4	450	1.4
Language spoken at home	430	1.5	530	1.7
Most often	240	0.8	255	0.8
On a regular basis	190	0.6	275	0.9
First official language spoken	425	1.4	480	1.5
Ability to conduct a conversation	1,185	4.0	1,240	3.9

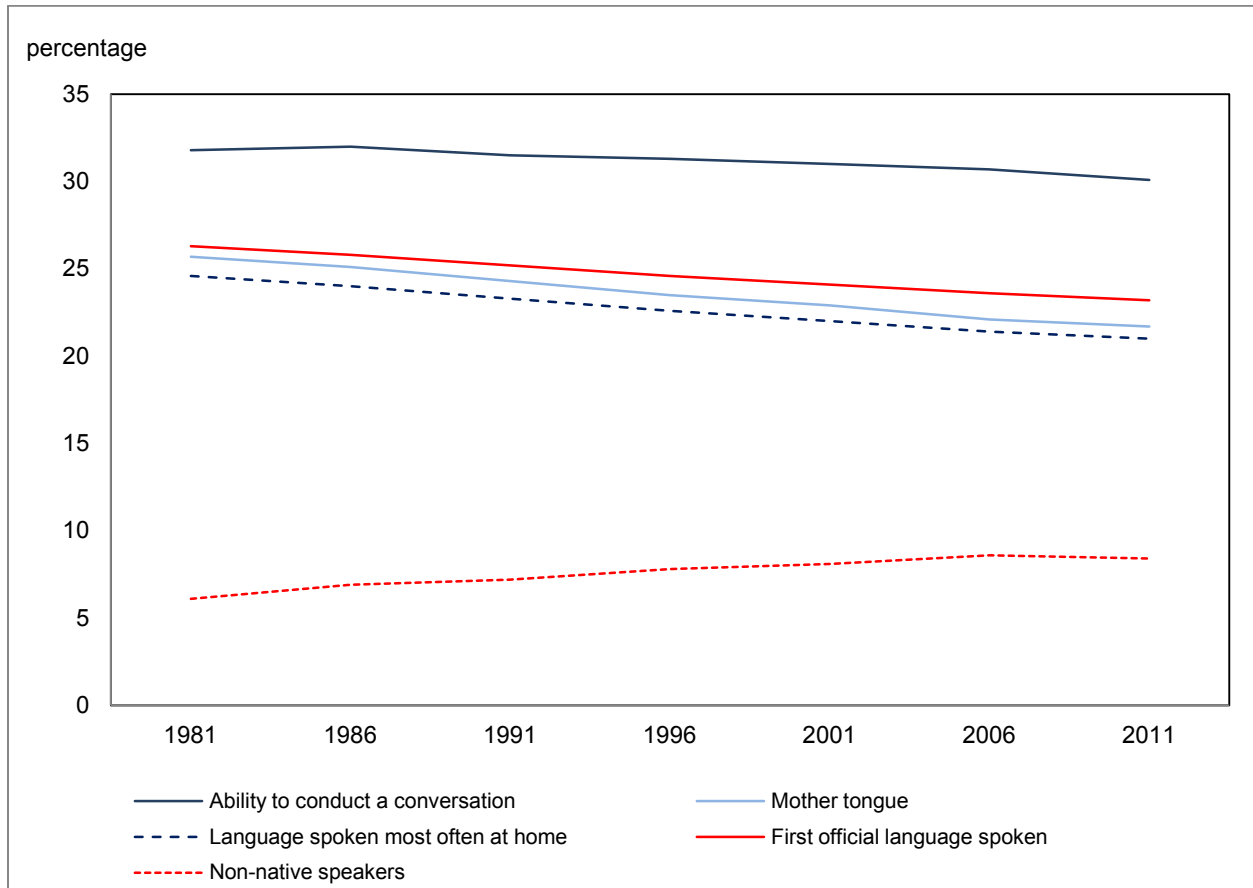
Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 2006 and 2011.

Steady decrease of French for the past 30 years¹³

The proportion of Canadians able to conduct a conversation in French has dropped slightly over the last 30 years. On the other hand, the decrease in the share of the population with French as mother tongue, first official language spoken or language spoken most often at home was more marked ([Figure 1](#)).

13. Only information from the 1981 Census onward is shown here. The decrease in the share of the population with French as a mother tongue in Canada has been observed since 1951.

Figure 1 Proportion of the population with French as mother tongue, language spoken most often at home or first official language spoken, or with the ability to conduct a conversation in French, Canada, 1981 to 2011



Notes: 'Non-native speakers' refers to those who can conduct a conversation in French, but who do not have French as their mother tongue.

For this figure, multiple responses were distributed equally between the French, English and Other groups.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1981 to 2011.

In 2011, 30.1% of the population was able to conduct a conversation in French, compared with 31.8% in 1981. This smaller decrease (compared with the decrease for mother tongue, first official language spoken and home language) was partly because of an increase in the number of people who could conduct a conversation in French, but who did not have French as their mother tongue. In 1981, 8.3% of those whose mother tongue was not French reported being able to speak French. In 2011, the proportion was 10.6%.

Compared with the change in the share of the Canadian population able to speak French, the decrease in the proportion of those with French as their mother tongue was more notable. French was the mother tongue of 25.7% of the population in 1981, and 21.7% of the population 30 years later. There was a similar decline in French as the language spoken most often at home: 24.6% of the population in 1981, compared with 21.0% of the population in 2011.

The proportion of the population with French as its first official language spoken also decreased steadily, but not as much as the proportion with French as a mother tongue. As for the proportion of people with French as first official language spoken in 1981, it was quite close to that of the population with French as its mother tongue at 26.3%. Thirty years later, it was 23.2%, a smaller decrease than in the population with French as its mother tongue, in particular because more than 7% of those with French as their first official language spoken did not have French as their mother tongue.

International immigration has strongest impact on the evolution of French

A number of demographic factors have contributed to the evolution of French and the *francophonie* in Canada. Aside from a low fertility rate and incomplete transmission of French as a mother tongue to the children of French-speaking parents,¹⁴ international immigration has the strongest effect on the evolution of French in Canada. On average, over the last 20 years, roughly 235,000 new immigrants have come to Canada each year, more than 80% of whom have neither French nor English as their mother tongue.

In general, of the country's two official languages, a large majority of these immigrants know only English and use it at work and in everyday life. Accordingly, it is usually English that is used in the homes of immigrants outside Quebec.¹⁵

Numbers up, but steady decrease in proportion

Although the proportion of the population with French as mother tongue, language spoken most often at home or first official language spoken has decreased over the last 30 years, the numbers have increased ([Table 8](#)). However, their growth rate was smaller than for the Canadian population as a whole.

In the last 30 years, between 1981 and 2011, the Canadian population has increased nearly 38%. By comparison, the population whose mother tongue is French grew 16%. The population with French as the language spoken most often at home or as first official language spoken increased by 17.6% and 21.3%, respectively. The growth in the population who reported being able to conduct a conversation in French (29.9%) was the most similar to the growth of the overall Canadian population (37.5%) since 1981. During this period, this population has in fact increased nearly 7.7 million to 10 million persons.

14. In 2011, around 50% of children with at least one parent with French as a mother tongue were passed on English as a mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec. See also the series [Portrait of Official-Language Minorities in Canada](#) (comprised of 11 issues).

15. In the 2006 Census, barely 2% of immigrants living in Canada outside Quebec had French as their first official language spoken (the single category 'French' and the multiple category 'French-English').

Table 8 Number of people with French as mother tongue, language spoken most often at home or first official language spoken, or with the ability to conduct a conversation in French, and percentage growth of population, Canada, 1981 to 2011

Year	Total population of Canada	French			First official language spoken
		Mother tongue	Language spoken most often at home	Ability to conduct a conversation	
1981	24,083,500	6,177,795	5,919,855	7,669,205	6,338,870
1991	26,994,045	6,562,065	6,288,430	8,508,955	6,813,215
2001	29,639,030	6,782,295	6,531,375	9,178,095	7,136,990
2006	31,241,030	6,892,230	6,690,125	9,590,700	7,370,350
2011	33,121,175	7,172,565	6,963,760	9,960,590	7,691,705
Percentage growth of population between 1981 and 2011	37.5	16.1	17.6	29.9	21.3

Note: Except for the total population numbers, multiple responses that included French were distributed equally among the French, English and Other groups. Only the French group's numbers are shown in this table.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1981 to 2011.

Additional information

Additional information on language at various levels of geography can be found in the [Highlight tables](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011002, [Topic-based tabulations](#), Catalogue nos. 98-314-X2011016 through 98-314-X2011045, and nos. 98-314-X2011048 through 98-314-X2011050, the [Census Profile](#), Catalogue no. 98-316-X as well as in the new census product [Focus on Geography Series](#), Catalogue no. 98-310-X2011004.

Note to readers

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2011 Census while maintaining the quality of the results, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Due to random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical document, highlight tables, and topic-based tabulations.

Box

Comparability of language data between censuses of population

For the first time in 2011, three language questions (knowledge of official languages, home language and mother tongue) were included on the census questionnaire that was administered to 100% of the population.

Language data and analysis published for all censuses since 1996 have been based almost exclusively on responses from the long-form census questionnaire administered to 20% of the population.

All trend analyses presented for this release, and its accompanying products, compare 2011 Census data to previous long-form census data.

Evaluation of data on the knowledge of official languages and the first official language spoken indicates that these data are comparable to those of previous censuses.

However, Statistics Canada has observed changes in patterns of response to both the mother tongue and home language questions that appear to have arisen from changes in the placement and context of the language questions on the 2011 Census questionnaire relative to previous censuses. As a result, Canadians appear to have been less inclined than in previous censuses to report languages other than English or French as their only mother tongue, and also more inclined to report multiple languages as their mother tongue and as the language used most often at home.

It is not uncommon in survey research to observe changes in response patterns due to changes to a questionnaire and most particularly due to changes in the context in which the question is embedded.

Data users are advised to exercise caution when evaluating trends related to mother tongue and home language that compare 2011 Census data to that of previous censuses.

In the case of the mother tongue data, comparisons other than those done in the current analysis are possible depending on the needs of the user, given that mother tongue was asked on both the short and long-form questionnaires in previous censuses. Users should take into account the advantages as well as the limitations of each dataset.

Readers will find a complete analysis of factors affecting comparability of language results between the censuses in the forthcoming publication, [Methodological Document on the 2011 Census Language Data](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011051.

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