



Office of the
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Official Languages

Commissariat
aux langues
officielles



FOLLOW-UP EXPLORATORY STUDY ON
linguistic insecurity in the telework
and hybrid work environment in the
federal public service

SUMMARY REPORT

November 2023

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publique fédérale en contexte de télétravail et de travail hybride
Rapport sommaire*

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Appendix A – Examples of bilingual identifiers

1.0 Introduction

This report¹ describes the main findings from eight targeted discussion groups made up of people working in the federal public service of Canada. During the discussions, which were held in April and May 2023, participants touched on a number of themes related to the use of Canada's official languages (English and French) in a virtual workspace—either through telework (i.e., entirely virtual) or in a hybrid work environment (i.e., partly virtual)—including linguistic insecurity.

In March 2019, linguistic insecurity in the federal public service was the subject of an [exploratory survey](#) of nearly 11,000 public servants conducted by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (the Office of the Commissioner) and the research firm PRA Inc. Considering the time that has passed since then, the Office of the Commissioner wished to return to a small group of federal public servants whose experiences had, on the whole, reflected some of the challenges associated with linguistic insecurity in that initial study. The discussion groups held in 2023 bring new perspectives that reflect the profound changes in the organization of work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 Summary of the methodology

The objectives of this follow-up study were as follows:

- Continue to explore the issue of linguistic insecurity and advance discussion of the topic.
- Better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and, more specifically, telework and the hybrid work model have influenced and are still influencing linguistic insecurity, and identify potential strategies for addressing this issue in the context of telework and a hybrid work environment.
- As appropriate, identify ways forward, including recommendations, to influence decisions by senior officials within the federal public service.

The discussion groups were designed to reflect a variety of situations and perspectives of people who reported having difficulties using either official language in the workplace or who were particularly interested in using either official language more often.

Participants were selected from among the 2,100 respondents who had answered the 2019 survey in regions designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes and who had expressed an interest in follow-ups. A smaller number of participants were also selected from a list of approximately

¹ The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages mandated the study to its Policy and Research Directorate and to PRA Inc. The project managers were François Dumaine from PRA and Robert J. Talbot from the Office of the Commissioner. Other contributors included Susanna Beaudin and Nicholas Borodenko from PRA and Véronique Boudreau and Clarence Lemay from the Office of the Commissioner. The project also benefited from the input and contributions of other employees of the Office of the Commissioner and of PRA.

50 individuals from various unilingual regions. The following criteria were applied in the formation of each of the different discussion groups:

- Perspectives (Anglophone, Francophone, employment equity groups, region, gender, etc.)
- Workplace realities (language-of-work environment, bilingual or unilingual region, second-language skills, etc.)
- Scenarios (discomfort using their first or second official language, in English or in French, or having an interest in using the minority official language of their workplace more often)

Approximately 800 individuals from an initial short list were contacted, and 180 indicated their potential interest. Based on these responses, short lists were subsequently created for each of the eight discussion groups.

The discussion groups were held between April 19 and May 17, 2023:

- All groups were conducted by videoconference and in the participants' preferred official language(s).
- A total of thirty-seven federal public servants took part, with four to six participants in each group.
- French was the first official language of about two thirds of participants, and English was the first official language of the other third.
- About two thirds of participants identified as women, and the other third identified as men.
- About one third of participants identified as a person with a disability, Indigenous, non-binary, a member of a visible minority or 2SLGBTQI+.
- Just over half of participants were from the National Capital Region, and the others were from all other regions of the country except the territories.
- The strike by some federal public service employees in April 2023 led to the postponement of three discussion groups, which then took place with no further delays.

In addition to the discussion groups, a literature review informed the project design and the analysis of the results.

3.0 What we learned

The perspectives provided by the discussion group participants made it possible to explore how virtual work (telework and hybrid work) is transforming the linguistic realities of federal public servants and to examine the potential impact on linguistic insecurity. In reading the perspectives described in the next subsections, it is important to consider the following elements regarding the scope and limitations of the study:

- First, the objective of this qualitative follow-up study was not to present a statistically representative perspective of the views of all members of the federal public service. Rather, its

goal was to gather frank, informed and meaningful perspectives from people in the federal public service. Among other things, the information gathered can inform further research and action on this issue.

- Second, it must be noted that at the time of the discussion groups, federal public servants had just switched from full-time telework (usually from home) to the hybrid work model, which involves working in person at federal agencies' and departments' offices two or three days a week and teleworking on the other days. Participants were therefore more able to discuss the impact of telework, which began in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, although several participants also discussed the hybrid work model.

3.1 Background on language of work in the federal public service

Framework for the Official Languages Act

[Part V](#) of the *Official Languages Act* states that “English and French are the languages of work in all federal institutions.” On that basis, it establishes certain parameters concerning their use. In [regions of Canada designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes](#), including the National Capital Region, federal institutions must ensure that the “work environments of the institution are conducive to the effective use of both official languages and accommodate the use of either official language by its employees”. In all other regions of the country, federal institutions must ensure that:

... the treatment of both official languages in the work environments of the institution in parts or regions of Canada where one official language predominates is reasonably comparable to the treatment of both official languages in the work environments of the institution in parts or regions of Canada where the other official language predominates.

Some employees in those regions may also have language obligations regarding service to the public.

Federal public servants whose position is attached to an office located in a region designated as bilingual for language-of-work purposes have the right to work and be supervised in the official language of their choice,² including the right to use the official language of their choice in meetings, to use computer systems in either official language and to receive documentation addressed to them as an employee in the official language of their choice.

In short, the objective in bilingual regions is to create an environment that is conducive to the **effective use** of both official languages and that allows employees to use either official language.³

² The *Official Languages Act* states that the right to be supervised in the official language of one's choice should be respected where “appropriate in order to create a work environment that is conducive to the effective use of both official languages.”

³ In the [Dionne](#) case, the Federal Court of Appeal clearly stated that these provisions of the *Official Languages Act* must be given a broad and liberal interpretation and that the “right to work in either official language in a federal

The challenge arising from unilingualism

In theory, providing an environment where it is possible to work in either official language may seem relatively simple if all employees in the office are bilingual. Agencies and departments would simply need to ensure that meetings are chaired bilingually, that documents addressed to employees are available in both official languages and that tools (such as software) are available in both official languages, for example. After that, everyone would be free to express themselves in the official language of their choice when interacting in the workplace.

However, the reality becomes more complex when the staff is a mix of employees who want to use either official language and others who only know one. What can then be done to ensure the “effective” use of both official languages, including during team meetings? And what if colleagues are all unilingual but in different official languages? What if some colleagues are bilingual but want to speak or write in an official language that may not be understood by their colleagues? What can be done to ensure that bilingual individuals do not bear the burden of systematically accommodating unilingual colleagues?

These different scenarios illustrate the challenges and difficulties associated with the use of official languages in the workplace. And these are the dynamics that were explored during the discussion groups.

Office of the Commissioner's 2019 survey

The [exploratory survey](#) on linguistic insecurity conducted by the Office of the Commissioner and PRA in 2019 provided a better understanding of the various realities that shape the use of official languages in the workplace in designated regions.⁴ The results of the survey also revealed that many public servants had experienced a feeling of linguistic insecurity. Linguistic insecurity refers to “a sense of unease, discomfort or anxiety experienced when using or attempting to use one’s first language or a second language due to a variety of environmental, perceptual, interpersonal, organizational, cultural and social factors.”⁵

A total of 44% of Francophone respondents and 39% of Anglophone respondents with an ability in French reported feeling uncomfortable using French at work. With regard to the use of English, 15% of Anglophone respondents and 11% of Francophone respondents reported feeling uncomfortable.

institution is illusory in the absence of an environment that respects the use of both official languages and encourages them to flourish” (para. 67). The court found that “Parliament’s overall intent [is] to maximize the opportunity for employees working in a prescribed bilingual region to be able to use the language of their choice at work, as is their right, provided that this right is exercised in a reasonable manner” (para. 72).

⁴ The issue of the use of official languages in the federal workplace was also the subject of a [report](#) by Patrick Borbey and Matthew Mendelsohn at the request of the Clerk of the Privy Council. The study noted that in practice, “the ‘language of work’ in the public service is English.”

⁵ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Linguistic (in)security at work – Exploratory survey on official languages among federal government employees in Canada*, Study report, January 2021, p. 1.

Factors that contributed to linguistic insecurity in the first and second official languages of respondents differed but were nonetheless interrelated:

- Respondents who reported being uncomfortable using their first official language (either English or French) were generally concerned about the perceived inconveniences it could create for other colleagues (e.g., the idea that some colleagues would be unable to understand what was said, that it would need to be translated and thus lengthen a conversation or meeting, or even that the respondent would be seen as a “troublemaker”).
- Respondents who felt uncomfortable using their second official language were often concerned about the additional effort required, the fear of being judged on the quality of their spoken or written language, or the tendency for colleagues to switch to the other language, particularly in the case of Anglophones trying to speak French.

According to the survey report, both groups of respondents would benefit from the knowledge that some of their colleagues are more bilingual than they realize (e.g., ability to speak or at least understand [receptive bilingualism]) and that some of them, first- and second-language speakers alike, may actually want to use the official language of the minority more often.

The survey report also touched on other elements that are discussed in this report, including the importance of informal situations and leadership in fostering a work environment conducive to the effective use of both official languages.

Emergence of a hybrid work model

Like many workers in Canada, a large portion of the federal public service was forced to work remotely, usually from home, when public authorities announced lockdowns in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2022, the federal government announced the phased introduction of a [common hybrid model](#) for the return of employees to the office at least two to three days per week while teleworking on the other days.

From the start of the lockdown in 2020, some people pointed out the negative impacts that widespread telework seemed to have on the use of official languages (despite its positive impact on the quality of life of many employees, including many participants in the discussion groups). Among other things, it was [reported](#) that virtual meetings tended to be in English only and that some documents were not translated into French, thus contributing to the pre-existing phenomenon of anglonormativity – or the predominance of one official language (usually English) – in the federal workplace.

3.2 A new reality emerging

Nature of interactions

With regard to the virtual work model (full-time telework or hybrid work), discussion group participants identified significant changes in the nature of their interactions with their colleagues:

- Many observed that interactions are much more structured and formal. There was a feeling among some participants that using videoconferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams is more formal than walking up to a colleague to ask a question. Even at the office, interactions are often by videoconference.
- According to many participants, the number of meetings has generally increased and takes up a greater part of their day. It was noted that videoconference meetings are easier to organize, which contributes to that trend.
- Many noted that the composition of work teams has changed and that videoconference meetings can include people from other regions who previously would not normally have been able to attend in person.⁶

“The major difference is the little exchanges over the day that have been completely lost, with only pre-programmed official meetings. Now, everything is done virtually.” [Translation.]

“I spent over five months in isolation and discovered that I hadn’t spoken any French during that time. I wasn’t aware of the opportunities I had to converse in French on a regular basis. My team is completely English-speaking, so all our work is done in English.”

Although some participants reported that they did not see any impact, many noted that this new work model had led to a certain sense of isolation. With less in-person and informal contact with colleagues, interactions have now become largely of a purely “business” nature in which the more social and human considerations are somewhat subdued. (Interestingly, some participants working in remote areas felt more connected.)

⁶ It is noted that even in the pre-COVID model, staff working remotely (e.g., those working in another region) could still attend meetings by videoconference, but according to the participants, the widespread use of videoconferencing, such as Microsoft Teams, transformed that aspect by more systematically including people working remotely.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the official language of the majority (primarily English) was the “language of business,” as some participants put it, while the official language of the minority (primarily French) was used more in informal situations. With the decline of informal situations due to remote work and the addition in some cases of less bilingual colleagues from other regions, the official language of the minority is used even less and heard less, according to many participants. In short, the “language of business” has increased and the “informal language” has lost ground.

“I’m not super confident speaking in French. The virtual environment sort of exaggerated that because I wasn’t exposed to French as much. Not running into my French colleagues in the hallways, that sort of thing, so I didn’t hear it in the home or anything like that as much, so I’m probably more nervous.”

For some, particularly Anglophones outside Quebec who want to practise their French, informal situations in the workplace are often their only opportunity to do so. Without such opportunities, language skills can erode, and employees become even less comfortable taking the “risk” of using their second language.

Francophones in a minority work environment are also less likely to hear French at work. There are fewer opportunities for smaller side conversations in the official language of the workplace’s linguistic minority than would otherwise occur during in-person meetings where the official language of the majority predominates. As one Francophone participant explained, the feeling of linguistic solidarity engendered by the physical presence of other Francophones and French-speaking Anglophones around the table had, for them, been lost in the quasi-anonymity of larger online meetings.

“I work at the office, but my colleagues are teleworking and working in hybrid mode. As a result, I’m always working in hybrid mode. Now a meeting needs to be called for every interaction, even for a five-minute discussion.”
[Translation.]

Many noted that the return to the office two or three days a week did little or nothing to mitigate the predominance of one official language, particularly English. Because the arrangements for returning to the office varied with each federal institution, it is difficult to generalize this finding. However, participants noted that even at the office, their workstations were not necessarily in the same place or near the same colleagues, and that most of their day continued to be in virtual mode.

Lack of a clear framework

A number of discussion group participants noted the lack of a clear framework for using official languages in telework and hybrid work environments. According to those participants, the federal government has not issued any formal directives on official languages dealing specifically with telework and hybrid work.⁷

⁷ It should be noted that the Treasury Board Secretariat issued a [directive](#) concerning language of work while teleworking that states that the designated worksite determines the applicable rights, not where the employee is teleworking from. Official languages are also mentioned in the [guidance](#) on hybrid work but not discussed in detail.

According to various participants, it is up to each manager whether to provide a framework for using English and French in the virtual work environment, be it during group meetings or bilateral meetings with managers. In some cases, managers have specifically encouraged employees to use either language during team meetings. Participants noted that some managers even tried to have largely bilingual meetings in which comments were translated either into both official languages or into the official language that was not understood by some employees.

However, according to participants, those efforts to accommodate both official languages often end up being abandoned if they slow down work or make meetings longer.

A number of participants also noted both the potential for and lack of formal guidance on new technological tools, such as automatic captioning and translation software embedded in videoconferencing programs. Some stated that they were already actively using such tools on their own initiative.

And so, for many participants, the challenges they faced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—documented in the Office of the Commissioner’s report on its 2019 [exploratory survey](#)—continue to be experienced in the hybrid work model, whether it be the official language in which they want to participate in meetings, the language in which they want to prepare documents, the language in which they are supervised, the language in which they want to work, or the language in which they want to develop or maintain their skills. For the vast majority of these participants, Anglophones and Francophones alike, that language is French.

“I can’t recall a specific directive. There are so many directives on bilingualism. There’s a lot of communication in that respect. But in practice, it doesn’t change much.”
[Translation.]

“In reality, if I start speaking French in a meeting, 90% of employees won’t understand. Why would I make the effort to speak in French and translate what I said? I choose to speak the language of the majority.” [Translation.]

Impacts on the use of official languages at work

Although there were some exceptions, various discussion group participants felt that telework and the hybrid work model tend to create or reinforce a work environment that is less conducive to the effective use of both official languages, contrary to the requirements of the *Official Languages Act* (some participants reported that they had seen no difference). More specifically, various participants noted the following impacts:

- **The more formal nature of meetings favours unilingualism:** Various participants were of the view that more formal meetings create pressure to use the language of the majority to ensure they are directly understood by colleagues, and that it is harder to gauge the language skills of others when online. According to some, being able to speak the language of your choice only really makes sense if the person can reasonably assume that their comments will receive the same attention as those of colleagues using the other official language. Knowing or assuming that they may not be understood by some colleagues, the person will thus decide to use the language of the majority.
- **The lack of interaction diminishes the commitment to bilingualism:** Various participants noted that the hybrid work model contributes to the creation of an environment in which employees are less exposed to the use of both official languages. Especially in regions where one official language is particularly predominant, the federal workplace is often where employees who speak the majority language can gain exposure to the minority language. As noted previously, however, even when they are at the office two or three days per week, many employees still have little interaction with their colleagues, which can result in less exposure to the minority language, an erosion of skills, less use and thus a greater risk of marginalization of that language.
- **The impact on training is both positive and negative:** Virtual work may improve professional development opportunities, particularly by creating online access to more sessions in the official language of the participant's choice. For second-language skills retention, virtual work has contributed to new opportunities, such as matching or "buddy" programs, which were very popular among Anglophone participants seeking to practise their French. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted language training in general, and some participants felt that learning a second language through an online course can be much harder and more impersonal than face-to-face and in person.

"Just because a meeting is bilingual doesn't mean you'll have met the needs of both official languages. In a bilingual meeting with a lot of French, Anglophones won't connect. The same thing is true for bilingual meetings with a lot of English; Francophones won't attend because they don't feel that they have the option of using their language and being fully understood and fully valued."
[Translation.]

- There is a need for mutual empathy:** According to some Anglophone participants, Francophones are not always aware of the difficulties associated with learning French in a virtual work environment during a pandemic, or of the impact on the chances for career advancement. According to some Francophone participants, Anglophones are not always aware of the mental load and extra work that results from always having to work in English, or of the impact on performance and chances for career advancement. During the study, opportunities for empathy seemed to be more present in the bilingual discussion groups that included both Anglophones and Francophones, where participants from each language group could hear directly from the other about their challenges and experiences.
- Colleagues' language skills are hard to gauge:** Without more daily informal, face-to-face interactions, various participants noted that it is harder to gauge colleagues' language skills, particularly in their second official language. People will therefore often assume that the person online speaks only English, even if they speak or at least understand French, which then reduces opportunities for Francophones to speak their first language and for Anglophones to use their second language. This can lead to more feelings of linguistic insecurity, which may then result in a reluctance to speak French and in turn cause further erosion of skills in that language.
- Members of equity groups risk further marginalization:** Some participants who identified as members of an equity group alluded to the risk of further marginalization that can occur when a person from a visible minority or a person with a disability uses the official language of the linguistic minority, either as a first or second language.
- Official language leadership has been decentralized:** The lack of strong and clear directives on the use of official languages in the new hybrid work environment leads to decentralized leadership, whereby individual managers are left playing a key role in determining the importance of official languages. Various discussion group participants noted that their ability to work in an environment conducive to the effective use of both official languages rests largely on the shoulders of their supervisors and managers. Under these circumstances, staff turnover can cause the work environment to change quickly, for better or worse.

*I think Anglophones don't practice a lot because they're embarrassed. They're afraid to talk and make mistakes. I think they also feel insecure, probably even more so than us Francophones.
[Translation.]*

"Our senior management makes an effort to speak in both languages, but I'd say that 95% or more of our meetings are in English. It's just faster and more efficient to be able to explain in English. But half of our team are Francophone including two who live in Montreal."

4.0 Conclusion and follow-up

Whether their employees are working at home, at the office or a combination of both, federal institutions are required to ensure that the work environment in bilingual regions is conducive to the effective use of both official languages.

As seen in the results of the Office of the Commissioner’s 2019 [exploratory survey](#), a number of federal institutions were struggling to create a work environment that was truly conducive to the effective use of both official languages even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion groups held as part of this follow-up study highlighted the significant challenges that can arise from using official languages in a virtual work environment (including telework and hybrid work). According to what we heard overall, virtual work often reduces opportunities to use an official language—most often, but not always, French. This can exacerbate the feeling of linguistic insecurity among speakers for whom it is their first or second official language.

“Sometimes, there are small points of insecurity that hit home for me, and I find it hard. It affects me psychologically. You hold back sometimes so you don’t cry.” [Translation.]

That being said, the use of both official languages should not be dependent on in-person work. Rather, it should be incumbent upon the government to find ways to leverage the new reality of hybrid work—and all the opportunities it presents both in-person and online—in favour of the equitable use of both official languages. The time to act is now, before the language habits and norms of the new hybrid work environment become more entrenched and difficult to change.

With this in mind, the findings from the group discussions were used to formulate a recommendation and identify possible courses of action to be explored to mitigate the challenges.

Recommendation:

- **Establish strong and clear directives for federal institutions:** There is an apparent need for the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat to issue much stronger and clearer directives concerning the use of official languages in the hybrid work environment, particularly during virtual meetings but also with respect to drafting documents, managing employees and demonstrating leadership among senior management. These directives must be communicated frequently and effectively to the entire federal public service. They must also seek to raise awareness among public servants of the potential risks of further marginalization of members of equity groups who use the official language of the linguistic minority as a first or second language.

“It is not virtual work that changes things. It is the linguistic attitudes of our managers. When they have bilingual language skills, we can work with them in the language of our choice. But sometimes, they have CBC, and I do not know how they were able to meet the language requirements. To be understood, we speak English, even if that is not my preference.” [Translation.]

Courses of action:

- **Ensuring proactive leadership from senior management:** Senior management must fully exercise their leadership to ensure that language rights and obligations are respected and that the effective use of both official languages remains at the core of public service priorities. Because the hybrid work environment can exacerbate the phenomenon of linguistic insecurity, it becomes all the more important to lead by example and convey clear messages about the place of official languages in daily work activities, both in-person and virtually. These clear

messages and expectations could be included, for example, in the performance objectives of executives and managers.

- **Making language comprehension skills easier to identify:** Just as employees are encouraged to indicate their pronouns, it may also be useful to invite people who can at least understand both languages (particularly French, when that is the language of the minority) to indicate their ability to communicate in both languages (e.g., in their electronic signature, in their background or in their personalized title during virtual meetings). Appendix A includes examples of linguistic self-identification that could be explored, for instance as the subject of a pilot project.
- **Leveraging technological options for language of work:** Even if technological options (e.g., simultaneous visual translation during virtual meetings) are yielding mixed results right now, technology is evolving very quickly and public servants are making use of it on their own initiative. It is therefore important to keep abreast of new opportunities and to fully integrate tools that can facilitate the use of both official languages in the workplace, but without affecting the substantive equality of the two languages.
- **Reintegrating informal exchanges into the routine:** One of the key findings of the discussion groups was the importance of informal exchanges in creating an environment that is conducive to the effective use of both official languages. It would be particularly beneficial for federal institutions to leverage opportunities for exchanges between employees, in-person and virtually (e.g., organize “buddy system” matchings and virtual and in-person discussion groups to acquire and maintain skills in either language, designate days when employees are encouraged to use their second official language, encourage team members to come to the office at the same time, etc.).

Appendix A – Examples of bilingual identifiers

Examples of identifiers for language skills

Sample signature:

Doug Smith (*him / il*)

Program Officer | Agent de programme

Department of Programs | Ministère des programmes

Please feel free to respond in the official language of your choice.

N'hésitez pas à répondre dans la langue officielle de votre choix.

Sample Microsoft Teams identifier:

(E/F) Doug Smith, him-il

- ➔ The (E/F) indicates that Doug at least *understands* English and French well enough and that people are encouraged to speak to him in either official language (although he may respond in just one language, where appropriate).
- ➔ Putting the “E” first suggests that English is Doug’s first or preferred official language. He could change it to (F/E) to suggest that he wants to use his French more often.