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# To count or not to count ‘francophones.’ Reading language planning and policy through the words of quantification

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses the concepts of ‘language ideologies’ and ‘governmentality’ to examine how language quantification processes tightly intertwine with language policy and planning (LPP) issues. Comparing four ways of (not) counting ‘francophones’ across the contexts of France, Switzerland, Canada, and the International Organization of La Francophonie, this article focuses on words rather than numbers. It unpacks how scientific and political discourses intertwine across different ways of defining ‘francophones,’ finding data to count them, and producing knowledge on ‘francophones’ for converging or diverging LPP purposes involving French language. The analysis shows the potential of reading into the scientific and political discourses that make those statistics (im)possible, in order to understand what the variations in these processes tell us about unequal power relations among speakers in the politicized management of a language, its variations, and its speakers.

Cet article utilise les concepts « d’idéologies langagières » et « gouvernementalité » pour étudier comment les processus de quantification d’une langue interagissent avec des enjeux d’aménagements et de politiques linguistiques. Comparant quatre manières de (ne pas) compter les « francophones » à travers les contextes de la France, de la Suisse, du Canada et de la Francophonie, cet article se concentre sur les mots plutôt que sur les nombres. Il montre comment des discours politiques et scientifiques s’entrecroisent à travers différentes façons de définir les « francophones », trouver des données pour les compter et produire des savoirs sur « francophones » à des fins d’aménagements et de politiques linguistiques impliquant la langue française. L’analyse montre le potentiel de lire les discours scientifiques et politiques qui rendent ces statistiques (im)possibles, dans le but de comprendre ce que les variations de ces processus racontent de relations de pouvoir inégales entre locuteurs dans la gestion politisée d’une langue, de ses variations et de ses locuteurs.

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## Introduction

In Switzerland, 22.8% of the population is francophone (OFS, 2024). In Switzerland, 67% of the population is francophone (OIF, 2022, p. 34). Curiously, both numbers are correct. They just happen to come from different sources and were measured by different institutions. Each of these estimates is based on definitions of ‘francophones’ that differ: the former represents answers to a question of the Swiss survey-based census that asks about ‘the language you think in and know best’ (see section 3.2 below); the latter comes from a question on the levels of knowledge of languages, which statisticians based in Quebec have extracted from a European survey conducted in Switzerland. Defining francophones as speakers ‘able to speak in French, whatever their level of command of other competences such as writing or reading,’ statisticians based in Quebec interpreted another set of data to produce a very different picture of the spread of French worldwide (section 3.4). Depending on the publication consulted, we may end up imagining French in Switzerland as being either a minority or a majority language.

One might focus on the results and highlight the paradox in these numbers. Or, one might ask: why would statisticians in Quebec – i.e. people living 6000 km away from Switzerland – spend so much time and effort quantifying ‘francophones’ in such a small country? And who needs to know this ‘objective’ number if Swiss authorities produce another ‘objective’ answer? What are the language policy and planning (LPP) interests involved in these diverging quantification practices?

Starting with these puzzling questions and inspired by Leeman’s (2018) and Urla’s (1993) approaches, the current article shows how LPPs and language statistics intertwine in language ideologies and governmentalities. The aim is to show that studying the discourses that make language statistics (im)possible helps to unravel important LPP interests and strategies. Drawing on four language quantification contexts in which French is involved (France, Switzerland, Canada, the International Organization of La Francophonie), this article shows how the same ‘francophone’ label is defined, quantified, and interpreted for LPP purposes which may be radically different across politico-economic contexts.

The purpose of this article is not to judge the quality of the statistics on francophones. The aim is to present another way of understanding LPP issues while reading statistics, with a focus on discourses rather than numbers. In this article, LPP refers to social, political, economic or scientific practices intended to regulate the use and development of language(s) within or across social or regional or national contexts. Thus, LPP is also a matter of coping with power relations and inequalities among speakers (cf. Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). Although LPP usually aims at forging institutionalized practices (especially when focusing on policy making), it is also something that people *do* in everyday interactions (cf. Hornberger, 2020; Nekvapil, 2016), performing language ideologies and governmentalities when counting speakers too.

## Theoretical and methodological frameworks for the study of the politics of language quantification

### *Language statistics: a quest for producing objective proof to govern linguistic diversity*

Statistics are a central technology of knowledge used to manage power relations in societies, to redistribute political and economic resources, as well as to implement LPP practices. They are perceived as a scientific tool providing objective results, which are believed to guide political or economic decisions without making subjective judgments (Foucault, 2004). Quantification is also entangled in complex sociocultural and institutional practices, which are embedded in scientific processes of categorization and standardization assumed to transcend diverse social and cultural frames of interpretation (Merry, 2016).

In such Foucaultian perspectives, censuses and surveys are an ideal locus for observing how languages and speakers are categorized, classified, quantified, ranked, and conferred symbolic or material values. Indeed, the literature has shown that statistics may differ drastically according to how institutions frame the wording of their question(s) on language(s) (Arel, 2002; Duchêne & Humbert, 2018). Moreover, quantifying languages is understood as a social practice: it implies a wide variety of actors and institutions coping with LPP issues when deciding – or contesting – how speakers shall be counted or not. Since the nineteenth century, language statistics have played a central role in nation-building as a scientific and political tool used to manage language diversity (Arel, 2002; Duchêne & Humbert, 2018). As Leeman (2018) shows through her analysis of language ideologies across US censuses, language questions in censuses have been adapted to legitimize the implementation of monolingual English standards and identify where multilingualism (mostly represented by Latinx communities) is a threat to English-only policies.

Linguistic minorities have played an important role in the development of language statistical methods for LPP purposes. Basque speakers (Urla & Burdick, 2018) or French speakers in Canada (see section 3.3) have built their own political rhetoric on numbers: to claim historical and identity legitimacy of their language, and to improve access to educational, professional, or media services and resources in their language, they have produced scientific proof that some policies were positively or negatively impacting the vitality of their minority language. As Urla and Burdick (2018) discuss, linguistic minorities like the Basque, Catalan, and Quebecers, have been prone to create innovative ways of quantifying language under various forms, as with the development of ‘demolinguistics,’ ‘the Basque Street survey,’ or linguistic landscape.

Nations and linguistic minorities are far from being the only producers of language statistics. When googling language facts on the internet, we often stumble upon numbers produced by *Ethnologue*. These statistics appear on Wikipedia or other encyclopedias and are widespread in Western societies. As several scholars have already shown, *Ethnologue* is produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), whose primary aim was to provide linguistic data to translate the Bible into endangered languages, which were then used by missionaries to evangelize indigenous populations (Stoll, 1982). Based in the USA, SIL is now considered a central standard in language classification and statistics

(Kamusella, 2012). It continues to expand and improve its documentary practices and still updates its numbers on the languages of the world. This international reference, often cited by linguists and language policy makers in reports, articles, or conferences, has come to existence with missionization and colonization. As such, language quantification may embody LPP purposes which transcend mere State networks and interests, and whose original ambitions may become lost across history. Therefore, understanding how language diversity is (not) quantified is also a matter of knowing how those seeking to quantify it must address this diversity with regard to LPP agendas.

### ***Governmentality and language ideologies: counting francophones at the interface of various quantitative and LPP practices***

The literature in LPP is often eager for numbers, especially when it seeks to understand large-scale sociolinguistic phenomena that qualitative tools may hardly capture. Of course, numbers might be useful to discuss the range and mass of linguistic diversity in relationship with LPP agendas. However, neglecting the historical contexts and the politico-economic conditions and discourses in which these numbers were produced risks, to a certain extent, naturalizing language ideologies which blur unequal power relations among speakers (Duchêne et al., 2018). As such, analyzing discourses with ‘language ideologies’ and ‘governmentality’ as a theoretical reading grid provides insight into how quantitative practices embody LPP discourses (cf. Leeman, 2018; Urla, 1993).

First theorized by Michel Foucault, governmentality is a concept mobilized and discussed in social sciences to understand how power relations are enacted in collective or individual settings. Applied to sociolinguistic issues, linguistic governmentality can be summarily defined as ‘an assemblage of techniques, forms of knowledge, and experts that seek to guide, rather than force, the linguistic conduct and subjectivity of the populace and/or the self’ (Urla, 2019, p. 262). Thus, linguistic governmentality can be observed in various discursive forms and settings, i.e. not merely in institutional texts such as laws or political speech, but also in everyday interactions among speakers who regulate their own language practices and representations based on how they internalize or resist language ideologies (Martín Rojo, 2016). Related to the concept of linguistic governmentality, language ideologies can be defined as:

[...] socially, politically, and morally loaded cultural assumptions about the way that language works in social life and about the role of particular linguistic forms in a given society [...]. Dominant ideologies can be doxic, that is, unspoken assumptions on which ordinary people as well as elites build social action and interpret the meaning of acts and events without question. (Woolard, 2016, p. 7)

To paraphrase Irvine and Gal (2000), language ideologies allow us to identify processes of linguistic differentiation, that is, the semiotic processes that contribute to produce same vs. different language categories to include or exclude speakers in certain socio-political contexts.

Together, governmentality and language ideologies shape the theoretical and methodological framework used to read into how LPP and language quantification practices interact. Governmentality is used to analyze the political economy, which conditions the making of language statistics including French and francophones, and to identify the

institutional networks and discourses which articulate the process of language quantification for LPP purposes. Language ideologies are analyzed to understand what ideas and beliefs about French and francophones are mobilized by whom, for what purposes and with what consequences for which speakers. The current analysis is mostly based on a revision of the scientific literature regarding how France, Switzerland, Canada, and La Francophonie quantify languages and speakers. For each of the four contexts, I systematically analyze how ‘francophones’ are defined and quantified, and how their numbers are interpreted, by whom, for what LPP purposes and with what consequences for whom.

This analysis aims to sketch and compare four specific contexts in which statistical and LPP debates are not strictly top-down and institutional, but may also be observed in long and winding discussions occurring outside governmental settings, potentially impacting speakers’ everyday interactions. Comparing four contexts in an article implies drastically summarizing each of the contexts. Thus, the description and analysis in section 3 give a simplified overview of the main actors and institutions involved in each context. Nonetheless, the overview of the four central language ideologies and governmentalities allows us to observe points of convergence and divergence across contexts in order to understand how LPP and statistics are diversely activated (not) to count what resembles the same statistical unit – i.e. ‘francophone’ – with various political ambitions.

### **Four ways of (not) counting ‘francophones’**

This section presents and discusses four different politico-economic contexts in which francophones and French are quantified diversely according to varying LPP priorities. The example of France illustrates a case rarely discussed in the literature: that of *not* counting speakers – or counting them partially – and relying on a monolingual LPP (section 3.1). The cases of Switzerland (section 3.2) and Canada (section 3.3) illustrate how the counting of francophones evolved differently in two nations sharing common LPP features: both are federalist political systems with LPP principles of territoriality and personality, and both include a notable French-speaking minority, but they diverge in how they quantify francophones, and they do not share the same politico-economic priorities. Finally, the case of La Francophonie is analyzed to show how an international organization promoting French around the world seeks to reframe and revive its colonial heritage through the process of counting francophones (section 3.4).

### **France: francophones are not French**

Official French statistics do not define nor count ‘francophones.’ France has never included a language question in its censuses but has conducted surveys or added questions on languages to small samples of the census (Filion, 2016). Language has always played a crucial role in assimilating foreign and national populations in mainland France as well as in its colonies, with the especial aim of maintaining linguistic homogeneity (Hajjat, 2010). France is often cited as monolingual State with strong monolingual LPP. As a democratic nation moved by humanistic values, France does not strictly ban linguistic and cultural diversity, yet tends to promote LPPs that favor the use of French as the one and only language of the nation.

Categories that allow the production of differentiated identities of French inhabitants, such as ethnicity, race, or language, are not welcome in French censuses. In the French national ideology of universality, citizenship is associated with moral values that are meant to transcend ethnocultural particularisms. As such, producing numbers on language, ethnicity, or nationality is problematic, for the further reason that French institutions fear that ethnocultural categories may be instrumentalized by far-right politicians to promote discriminatory policies (Blum, 2002). Interestingly, this rather monolingual, ‘universalistic’ LPP ideology and governmentality unfolds very differently in methodological discourses in mainland than in colonial France.

Statistics in French colonies did not follow the same universalistic logic: categories such as ethnicity and religion were defined and quantified in relation to different governing practices of domination (Blum, 2002, pp. 129–130). While seeking to spread one single language to govern populations across the Empire, the French defined and quantified sociolinguistic profiles differently in the colonies. As such, the word ‘francophone’ was first coined by Onésime Reclus, a French geographer and strong advocate of French colonialism. In an 1880 publication, in attempting to find where the French Empire could be revived, Reclus came up with the word ‘francophone’ to categorize ‘all persons who are or seem destined to remain or to become participants in our language [i.e. French]’ (quoted and translated in Vigouroux, 2013, p. 380). For Reclus, Africa was the continent in which these ‘francophones’ were likely to make the French Empire great again (Pinhas, 2004). Nowadays, the word ‘francophone’ does not systematically evoke colonialism in France. Still, the French do not usually define themselves as ‘francophones,’ but associate this category with speakers of French who are not French citizens, i.e. speakers living in or coming from countries other than France.

From the nineteenth century until today, surveys on languages in mainland France have not focused primarily on French, but on anything that diverges from it. Named ‘patois’ or ‘dialects,’ usually to devalue regional languages such as Breton or Occitan, French statistics have sporadically focused on languages used across the country. Surveys such as the belligerent *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d’anéantir les patois, d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française* (Report on the necessity and the means to eradicate patois, to universalize the use of French language, 1794)<sup>1</sup> or *Enquête* (Survey) *Coquebert de Montbret (1806-1812)* were aimed at measuring the spread of linguistic varieties to monitor the imposition of one standardized language across the country. Both surveys embodied LPP, which explicitly sought the imposition of monolingualism in the very centralizing spirit of the French Revolution (cf. Certeau et al., 1975; Ködel, 2014).

More than a century later, French national statistics have produced numbers on languages through other surveys such as *Etude de l’histoire familiale* (Study of the family history, 1954-1999) or *Trajectoires et Origines* (Trajectories and Origins, 2008-2020), focusing mainly on language uses and language transmission among families with a migration background or with regional languages of France (Filion, 2016; Héran, 2002), and more recently on the knowledge of French (Insee, 2023). There were several questions on languages, but the sample was small enough to avoid giving speakers of regional languages, such as Basque, Occitan, or Breton, the scientific means to support territorial LPP claims (cf. Blanchet et al., 2005). These various surveys favored a sociological approach to language diversity, with independent

demographers focusing on social groups and their language use in various contexts of social life. Moreover, the language questions in French surveys do not include notions that are strictly interpreted as identity tags, such as a question on ‘mother tongue’ or ‘native language.’ This is quite telling of the French language ideology of universalism: other languages shall not be counted in ways that may associate language with ethnocultural origins, at least not in mainland France.

Some French sociolinguists, such as Blanchet et al. (2005), judge the absence of thorough language statistics as revealing a taboo around languages in France. French statisticians involved in language quantification disagree: they interpret the absence of language questions in the main census as a general lack of interest in language issues in French statistics and declare having scientific autonomy, i.e. working under no governmental pressure (Filion, 2016, p. 20). François Héran, a French statistician involved in these statistics, gives similar arguments and mentions logistical reasons (lack of space on census questionnaires). However, in the same article, Héran also openly declares his mistrust in regional language activists’ demands to produce more systematic language statistics (Héran, 2002, pp. 55–60). These few examples show that not quantifying languages in France is subject to tensions and interests, no matter how independent French statisticians are from the government. Regional language activists and sociolinguists (the latter often being involved in the promotion of linguistic diversity and regional languages) seem to have very little impact on the census.

As this condensed overview shows, French LPP and French national statistics intertwine around the ideology and governmentality of monolingualism: along with intense political centralizing efforts, France continues to organize society around one universal language that is believed to ease the governance of culturally and linguistically diverse speakers. The promotion of monolingualism translates differently across time and territories into the aim of bringing national unity. In mainland France, monitoring linguistic diversity was part of planning the eradication of patois and regional language two centuries ago. Measuring multilingualism transformed into more scientific and sociological discourses during the twentieth century, including languages of immigration. Using surveys instead of comprehensive censuses is a way of killing two birds with one stone in the monitoring and forging of LPP: measuring the use of French among speakers who could potentially diverge from monolingual usages, as well as avoiding the delivery of significant results that could be instrumentalized among French citizens speaking regional languages. As such, not counting francophones in censuses does not mean that the French government does not care about French: the language is still quantified through the lens of surveys, and according to Héran (1993), results prove French is so manifestly widespread that speakers of other languages could hardly threaten its hegemony. Moreover, the category ‘francophone’ is used to define French speakers who are not French, or at least, who do not live in mainland France.

### ***Switzerland: ranking ‘francophones’ as a territorial and political minority among other x-ophones***

The management of multilingualism has been part of core foundations of Swiss LPP since the nineteenth century. Relying on the principles of *territoriality* and *personality* (cf. Nelde et al., 1992) within a federalist system, which delegates considerable sovereignty

to regional circumscriptions called ‘cantons’ (for managing education, healthcare, the police, etc.), all four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh) are used diversely according to national or regional contexts. German is the dominant language (with 61,8% mentioning it as a ‘main language’ in 2022), followed by French (22.8%), Italian (7.8%) and Romansh (0.5%) (OFS, 2024). Migration and non-national languages are also a center of interest in language statistics and Swiss LPP concerns. In 2022, these ‘other languages’ represented 23.4% of the ‘main languages’ of the population, reflecting the important presence of speakers with a migration background. For reasons of space and cohesion with the topic, this section focusses on French.

In official Swiss statistics, various data can be found to count francophones according to various indicators, based on the annual survey-based census or in another survey on languages: ‘the main language(s); the language(s) spoken at home or at work; the language(s) used regularly’. The data most used to describe and quantify the four national languages – and as such, to talk about ‘francophones’ in Switzerland – is the ‘main language question’ from the survey-based census, hence a focus on this question. Note that Swiss-French speakers do not systematically define themselves as ‘francophones.’ Traditionally, they label themselves ‘Romands,’ although the word ‘francophone’ is now widespread in Swiss-French areas and may include both Swiss and foreign French speakers (cf. Prikhodkine & Gajo, 2019).

Throughout history, official language statistics have constantly been used to guide LPP debates at federal and regional levels. Since language questions have been included in decennial population censuses since 1880, speakers have cultivated a personal relationship to these numbers across time and regions. For those belonging to a minority, declaring one’s ‘mother tongue’ or ‘main language’ was a way to assert their sense of belonging to a linguistic community.

Introduced in 2010, the ‘main language’ question was inherited from the census’ ‘mother tongue’ question (1880-1980), which was followed by the ‘language’ question (1990-2000). Though the label has changed over time, the wording has remained more or less intact for decades: ‘the language you think in and know best’ (about the history of language quantification in Switzerland, see Humbert, 2022, pp. 75–131). The original assumption of this question was that speakers needed to fit into the dominant linguistic environment, to an extent such that the local language must colonize their affective and cognitive systems. If, for example, a Swiss-German moving to a French-speaking city declared ‘German’ as their ‘mother tongue,’ this was considered proof they had not assimilated into the French language area. If ten years later the same person indicated ‘French’ in the census, the authorities would assume they had ‘assimilated’ into the language, because French would have substituted German in their intimate cognitive system (thinking in French and knowing it best) and emotional and biological inheritance (references to the ‘mother’ in past censuses). In turn, at local and national levels, authorities interpreted the numbers as a way of knowing whether the territories retained some sort of linguistic homogeneity, or whether they were changing (cf. Meli, 1962). Alongside speakers of the two other national language minorities, Swiss-French speakers feared a ‘Germanization’ of their territories, especially in contact zones. For them, results from the decennial census were embedded in heated political debates, implying the preservation of territorial LPP, which for Swiss-French speakers meant keeping French as a

language of use not only in municipal and cantonal institutions, but also in education or in commercial settings.

Although the word ‘assimilation’ has disappeared from statistical discourses, this assimilationist rationalization of language diversity somewhat mirrors Swiss territorial LPP: whether of Swiss or foreign origin, speakers are expected to adapt their language practice according to the local official language(s) in use. However, when communicating with Federal authorities, they may choose any of the four national languages following the principle of personality, but this happens only occasionally due to the strong Federalist decentralization of services, hence a stronger link with territorial matters. Thus, Federal authorities – along with regional institutions – cultivated a ‘native speaker ideology’ (cf. Doerr, 2009) through the census for a century: each speaker was assumed to belong to one homogenous imagined community of speakers ‘thinking in’ the same language and sharing similar origins. Obviously, in many areas in Switzerland, this way of forcing into monolingualism was problematic for speakers, especially in language-contact zones and in families with bi – or multilingual practices.

The native speaker ideology was challenged during the 1980s. Due to growing political tensions between political representatives from the three language minorities and the German-speaking majority, functional multilingualism began to be explored as a solution to promote national and social cohesion. Moreover, linguistic diversity is becoming more diverse with growing external immigration. Across working groups and meetings including officials, scholars, and activists (with all four national languages being represented), people are noticing that the statistics lack data on multilingualism. Statisticians agreed on changing the labeling of the ‘mother tongue’ question into the ‘language question’ for the 1990 census of population, keeping the same definition with the possibility of indicating only one ‘language.’ However, statisticians added two questions on the languages (plural) spoken at home and at work. Mostly incited by representatives of minority languages, these changes were also restricted by methodological concerns: Swiss statisticians wished to keep some level of comparability with past data on ‘mother tongue,’ hence the minimal change with respect to the first question.

This quest for statistical continuity is increasingly challenged by sociolinguistic realities and political debates. While discussing new ways of quantifying languages in anticipation of the new 2010 survey-based census, Swiss statisticians and linguists realized that many of bilingual speakers, especially second-generation immigrants, found the ‘language’ question to be ambiguous. A tendency was to indicate only one non-national language and, as such, to interpret it as a question on ethnocultural origin. It would indeed be problematic to produce numbers which could potentially be interpreted to prove that speakers who grew up and were educated in Switzerland, and often obtained Swiss citizenship, did not know any national language. As such, how languages are quantified in Switzerland changed significantly in 2010: speakers are henceforth allowed to add more than one language to the revised ‘main language’ question, i.e. they can be defined and counted as bilingual or multilingual according to restrictive criteria. Indeed, the 2010 survey-based census specifies: ‘if you think in and have a very good knowledge of more than one language, please specify below.’

Since 2010, Swiss statistics have given up on the traditional decennial census in favor of a complex multimodal data collection. Languages are quantified only using sample-

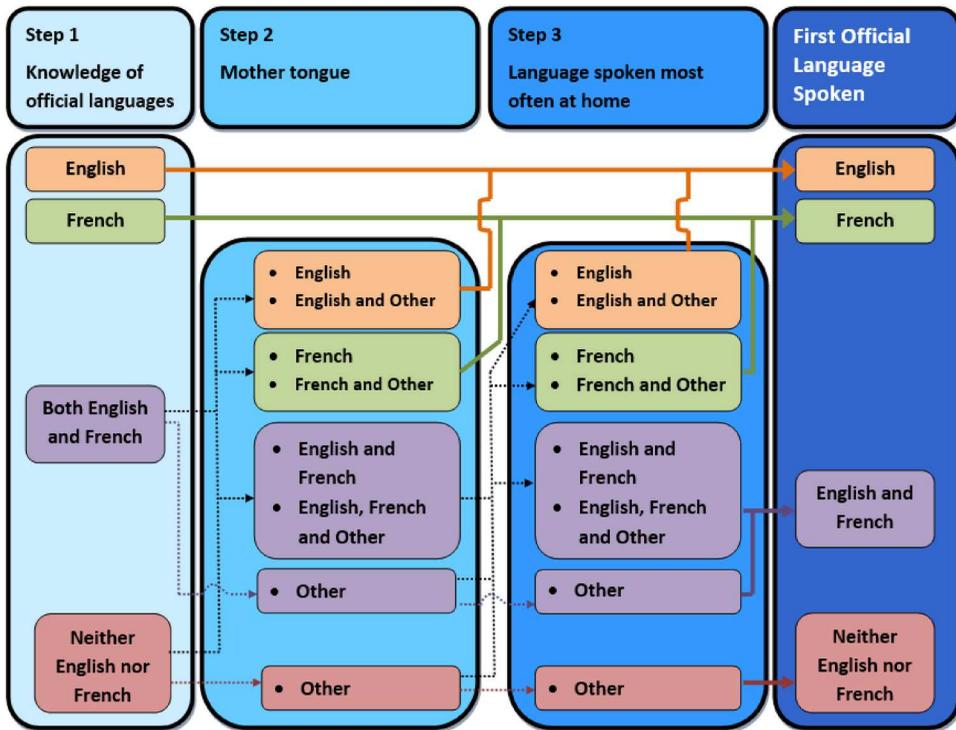
based techniques. The arguments for this drastic restructuring are mainly financial: the Swiss government wants statisticians to deliver more results, spending less money, and relying on a broader diversity of data and population register (Jost, 2016). Among the many consequences, language data lose their fine-grained, municipal-census precision (which is mostly problematic for Romansh, see Coray, 2017 for a discussion). However, the 2010 restructuring also allows for a production of more diverse data on languages. Survey-based approaches to language in Switzerland force statisticians, LPP officials, and activists to modify their perceptions of linguistic diversity. Instead of focusing on traditional municipal territorial issues, the new sampling techniques imply a complex reconceptualization of typologies of speakers, whose multilingualism is measured according to various questions on language uses. This is particularly salient for the growing focus on various types of migrant populations and on Italian and Romansh minorities (who are functionally more likely to be multilingual and thus are conceived as positive agents of social cohesion if their multilingualism includes a national language, cf. Humbert, 2022, pp. 279–332).

Within this complex discursive, statistical, and LPP evolution, francophones may take different shapes across data and debates. They are part of long-established administrative and statistical practices that bind French to territorial LPP rights and practices. Francophones in Switzerland do not struggle to be counted otherwise. Their LPP claims mostly occur at the Federal level and in very localized regional cases. For Swiss francophones, the main interest in keeping statistical data is that of maintaining representativity in high-level Federal positions, i.e. powerful positions in the State (Coray et al., 2015), and to back-up their territorial LPP claims. Basically, francophones in Switzerland want to keep their pre-eminent position among minorities, and to promote a vision of multilingualism in which French remains of national importance. Therefore, defining and counting francophones in Switzerland is mostly based on compromises with Federal institutions and alliances among national minorities.

### ***Canada: when francophones demand recounting***

In Canada, English and French are the two official languages at the national level, yet English is clearly dominant. Certain indigenous languages have a specific status in some provinces. LPP, like in Switzerland, is organized around the principles of territoriality and personality, although the principle of personality has a wider scope in Canada than in Switzerland (cf. Späti, 2015). In Quebec, French is the only official language for provincial matters, and it is the only territory where French is the dominant language. In other provinces, such as New-Brunswick and Ontario, francophones are a minority which benefits officially from similar LPP alongside English. Quebec francophones have been active in promoting French LPP both at regional and national levels, developing their LPP rhetoric on language statistics, mainly to denounce processes or risks of ‘Anglicization.’ Unlike the Swiss francophones, the Canadian francophones are competing with a language which is widespread at an international level.

In Canadian statistics, ‘francophones’ (or ‘anglophones,’ or ‘allophones’ for those strictly falling in the category ‘other’) are counted through the ‘derived variable’ called ‘First official language spoken,’ as summarized below in [Figure 1](#). To put it simply, one can be counted as ‘francophone’ according to very different criteria,



**Figure 1.** Derivation of the First official language spoken (StatCan, 2023).

making the conception of ‘francophone’ a little confusing. Step 1 above is based on the question ‘can this person speak English or French well enough to conduct a conversation?’ It evokes the communicative approach in language teaching, which focuses on various degrees of ‘competence’ to do things in social life. Here, the level ‘well enough’ is associated with the task ‘conduct a conversation’ to monitor how many speakers declare being able to use one or both official languages. For respondents who indicated both languages or neither of the two in the questionnaire, step 2 ‘mother tongue’ is activated to filter the speaker’s belonging to one of the three x-phones. The ‘mother tongue’ question in the Canadian census is: ‘what is the language that this person first learned at home in childhood and still understands?’ Note the diachronic dimension seeking to follow speakers from birth to the moment of the census. Notice, too, the significant differences in wording compared to the former Swiss ‘mother tongue’ question. If Canadian statistics are still unable to make a speaker fit into only one language category, step 3 is activated to check ‘which one [of these languages] does this person speak most often at home?’, allowing respondents to ‘indicate more than one language only if they are spoken equally at home’ (StatCan, 2020). What is sought throughout this process is a sorting out of speakers to classify them into only one of the two official languages, avoiding as much as possible ending up with too many bilinguals. The criteria are very diverse: from communicative skills to language use at home, via the ‘mother tongue’ question, the latter being historically heavily loaded with emotional and ethnonational discourses.

Indeed, the Canadian mother tongue question has been used throughout the twentieth century to quantify the mass and proportions of people belonging to one of the two officially recognized language groups. Being ‘francophone’ or ‘French-Canadian’ according to censuses and LPP was mostly conceived in essentializing terms: language was considered a biological and cultural heritage, and less a functional linguistic feature (Corbeil, 2021; Piché, 2011). However, using only a ‘mother tongue’ indication was unsatisfactory to francophone activists in Canada, because the category was not always representative of language uses in important contexts of social life, such as education, politics or work. Since the 1960s, francophones in Canada – mostly from Quebec – have developed a strong rhetoric that relies fundamentally on demanding recounts and new questions from one census to another (Prévost & Beaud, 2002). Through the forging of a discipline they named ‘démolinguistique’ (demolinguistics), Quebec demographers have created scientific resources to improve quantifying practices, with the political intention of proving and denouncing processes of ‘Anglicization’ of French-speaking areas and communities (Wargon, 2000). Adding questions to the census was not just intended to produce additional data, but was a strategy for the francophone minority to demand stricter LPP and to monitor LPP effects in specific domains, such as the use of French in the workplace. Statistics are thus a tool to measure the efficiency of LPPs through measures of language shift or maintenance as a proof of ongoing – or prospective – endangerment for French across Canada. A lot of these demolinguistic studies have been published in *Cahiers québécois de démographie* (*Quebec Journal of Demography*) since 1971. They have often been mediatized in Canada, especially in Quebec (Corbeil, 2021; Prévost & Beaud, 2002).

Immigration is a central topic both in LPP and language statistics. If counting ‘francophones’ is a subject of heated debates in Canada, this is also due to how migrants are integrated as a potential asset or threat for the maintenance of French. Although francophone activists do not systematically share the same ideas on French and francophonie (cf. Heller, 2012), it is important for Canadian francophone institutions to know whether the so-called ‘allophone’ immigrants are choosing French or English when settling in Canada. Since the 1970s, among numerous laws, francophone politicians have managed to build LPP measures that favor the use of French among immigrants, either by boosting the selection of qualified immigrants who already knew French (cf. Violette, 2018), or by making the learning of French a condition for settling permanently (Pradeau, 2021, pp. 136–151). According to Corbeil (2021), migrations, along with evolving LPPs in Canada and Quebec, have also impacted how statisticians modify their practice. The ‘mother tongue’ question is too tightly related to the Quebec ethnonationalist approach to French, which tends to exclude immigrants who would communicate in French in everyday uses but not necessarily mention it as a ‘mother tongue’ (Corbeil, 2021; Piché, 2011). As such, since the 1980s, ideological and methodological debates have led the Canadian government to foster the statistical concept of the ‘first official language spoken’ during the 1990s to include more complex language dynamics in sorting out ‘francophones,’ ‘anglophones’ and ‘allophones’ (Corbeil, 2021, p. 26).

Francophones in Canada have invested a lot more energy than Swiss francophones in (re)defining and (re)counting their ‘francophones.’ Methodological debates intertwine closely with LPP discussions among the francophone minority to counter the domination

of the English-speaking majority. The addition of language questions across censuses and the creation of the derived variable are also linked to demographic manifestations of an evolving political economy: immigration policies and sociolinguistic practices lead to a redefinition of who is and who counts as a ‘francophone’ in Canadian society. A more complex conception of speakers is adopted, alternating between monolingual and multilingual ideologies, with the aim of sorting out diversity to keep an account of the dichotomic evolution of anglophones and francophones, and to monitor the impact of immigration on the vitality of French. Being francophone means evidently different things among Canadians and French-speaking people and institutions. Yet, it is constantly moved by quantitative practices that try to make sense of what it means to count as a francophone. As the next section confirms, Canadian LPPs seeking to boost the vitality of French rely on the capitalization of francophone immigrants, or in converting speakers into francophones.

### ***La Francophonie: are we all francophones now?***

La Francophonie, with a capital ‘F,’ is an institution dedicated to promoting the French language and political, educational, economic, and cultural cooperation worldwide. Created in 1970, the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* (*Agency of cultural and technical cooperation*) is now restructured and called *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, and it gathers 93 member States and observer members. With a lowercase ‘f,’ ‘francophonie’ usually ‘refer[s] to the group of people worldwide who speak French, although the term francophone is used more narrowly in some communities’ (Vigouroux, 2013, p. 380). In what follows, the focus is on quantitative and LPP discourses of institutional Francophonie, through which the worldwide quantification of the category ‘francophone’ must confront diverse sociolinguistic and politico-economic interpretations of the term.

La Francophonie works like most international organizations with a Secretary General and parliamentary assembly, including countries such as France, Canada, Switzerland (the three major funding bodies), and regional representations like Quebec and Louisiana. La Francophonie’s LPP is not based on binding jurisdictional practices, but rather on symbolic moral values that member States are expected to share, along with the promotion of French. Historically, among priorities, La Francophonie aims to counter ‘Anglicization’ and develop an alternative globalization, mostly in French, that defends multiculturalism (Vigouroux, 2013). Without going into historical details, some people conceive of it as a genuine project of solidarity and development with former French and Belgian colonies, which was desired by the presidents of freshly decolonized governments (cf. Valantin, 2010). Others, including several African intellectuals and scholars (cf. Beti, 1988; Ndiaye, 2021), do not share this vision and claim La Francophonie is an avatar of colonialism.

La Francophonie invests mostly in diplomatic representational efforts (e.g. observing election processes in Senegal) and educational projects (e.g. promoting the implementation of bilingual preschool teaching of an African national language along with French). The focus on education and Africa is particularly salient. It is based on the idea that education in French is an indicator of successful educational policies in African States with French as an official language (Humbert, 2023a, p. 76). Core to

this ideology is the assumption that French is better equipped than national African languages to overcome the tremendous efforts still needed to make literacy the norm in several African countries (cf. Puren & Maurer, 2018). The selective promotion of linguistic diversity by La Francophonie is thus conditioned by boosting the vitality of French among African multilingual speakers.

In the construction of ideologies seeking to spread LPP principles in favor of French around the world, producing quantitative and qualitative data on French and ‘francophones’ has been a constant subject of discussion in various institutions of La Francophonie since the 1980s. Counting ‘francophones’ proved to be almost impossible, because statistical data on language were lacking in several countries, forcing officials to draw rough estimates. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Quebec demographers started to become more involved in this quantitative endeavor. Two statistical observatories were created around 2008: the *Observatoire de la langue française* (Observatory of French Language, hereafter ‘Observatoire’) and the *Observatoire démographique et statistique de l’espace francophone* (Demographic and Statistical Observatory of francophone areas, hereafter ‘ODSEF’). Originally based in Paris (but moved to Quebec in 2022), the Observatoire is part of La Francophonie’s institutions, and it can rely on strong diplomatic French networks (embassies, missions, etc.). Based in Laval University (Quebec), the ODSEF can count on long-established academic networks within the fields of demography and African Studies, cultivating strong connections with some national statistical offices in Africa and with UN and UNESCO international statistical programs. The ODSEF is funded by La Francophonie’s and Quebec’s institutions (more details on the origins of the creation of statistical observatories in Humbert, 2023a). Together, the Observatoire and the ODSEF define, count, and quantify ‘francophones,’ and interpret socioeconomic and demographic phenomena about the evolution of French and francophones in various contexts. These results are published every four years in an encyclopedic publication named *La langue française dans le monde* (French language worldwide), a reference book publishing numerous statistics and various studies about French and francophones around the world. Major results are spread and discussed across French-speaking media around the world.

Since 2014, the Observatoire and the ODSEF define francophones as those who are ‘able to speak in French, whatever their level of command of other competences such as writing or reading’<sup>2</sup> (OIF, 2014, p. 7). The definition focuses on an oral, communicative competence (speaking) and minimizes writing and reading skills. As of 2022, this definition leads to quantifying 321 million francophones worldwide (OIF, 2022, p. 21), a figure in constant growth since 2010. The definition echoes the Canadian census question on the knowledge of official languages seen above, which focuses on the ability to have a conversation. Without going into the details of methodological debates that the Observatoire and the ODSEF held with French-speaking sociolinguists, linguists, and demographers of the world (cf. Maurer, 2015; OIF, 2008), this rather inclusive definition is based on a core ideology of La Francophonie: institutions need to celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity wherever French plays some political role in order to foster international bonds among francophones. This implies acknowledging that French is composed of important sociolinguistic variations among first-language speakers across the globe and that it is used along other local languages, not necessarily as a first language (Humbert, 2023b).

This ideology is constantly repeated in *French language worldwide*, and it is even asserted next to the definition used for statistical purposes when the Observatoire states that no one should ‘judge by the quality of the language practiced by another [speaker]’<sup>3</sup> (OIF, 2014, p. 8), referring to the linguistic variations found in the ways francophones living outside of France speak French. The statistical definition is also inclusive of second and foreign language speakers of French, because they are all identified by the Observatoire and ODSEF as belonging to this same category along with so called native speakers. However, distinctions are still produced with figures on francophones who were ‘born with French’ (mostly located in France, Belgium, Quebec and Switzerland), those who ‘live in French’ (mostly in African countries with French as an official language) and those who ‘choose French as a foreign language’ (ibidem, p.10-13). Among these different types of francophones, the label ‘mother tongue’ is mobilized with the exact definition from the Canadian census (but not the Swiss one) (ibidem, p.10). Another definition is based on general populations of La Francophonie member States, including millions of people who do not know a word of French (ODSEF, 2012). This last category assumes ‘francophones’ are citizens of the same international geopolitical space, even if they do not know anything about La Francophonie, nor know any French, nor enjoy the same political rights.

Across definitions, the quantifiers engage in discourses that are inclusive of language diversity, which end up producing a figure including a broader imagined community of speakers, blurring the lines between those ‘born with’ French and those who ‘have become’ French-speakers. Still, they identify and quantify other ‘sub-categories’ of francophones within this inclusive definition, showing that they continue differentiating various types of francophones according to this inclusive definition. The Quebecer footprint is evident in the definitions chosen to identify and count francophones. It becomes even more salient in the ways in which statistical data are handled.

As the ODSEF itself recognizes, no census or survey question in the world strictly matches the main definition of francophones discussed above (ODSEF, 2022, pp. 8–9). Providing what they call ‘direct estimates,’ the authors usually interpret a variety of questions asking more or less ‘the knowledge of a language’ to make respondents fit into their own definition of who counts as francophone (ODSEF, 2022, pp. 24–30). Regarding the production of ‘indirect estimates,’ used when no recent data on language have been collected in the country or region under quantification, results from the Demographic and Health Survey (led mostly by USAID, an American agency) are consulted for five African countries, among which is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (ODSEF, 2022, pp. 11–12), a country with 48.9 million francophones according to the ODSEF. Studied and developed by demographers associated to the ODSEF, the indirect estimates assume that, in African countries where French is the only official language of education, children and adults who have spent some time in school (usually around 5–6 years) are ‘able to read and write in French’ (ODSEF, 2022, pp. 25–26). The authors support their approach by reminding that UNESCO retains a similar approach to consider people as ‘literate’ (idem, p.26), although the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has abandoned this method since 2006 (Unesco, 2008, p. 19; Maurer, 2024, p. 8). This approach is also published and promoted in *La langue française dans le monde*, where it is assumed that francophones are almost always literate in African countries where French is the language of education (OIF, 2014, pp. 28–31). Note that a similar method was already

applied in the 1980s institutions of La Francophonie (Haut Conseil de la francophonie, 1986, pp. 19–22). As such, LPP governmentality and ideology on French in Africa is embodied in statisticians' methodology: Northern statisticians believe that data on education are relevant to measure the vitality of French in Africa because they evolve in institutions which believe that implementing French in francophone African educational systems is the only way to reach UNESCO's goals for literacy.

The Northern gaze remains dominant throughout the process of quantification and the emergence of LPP interests. Although the ODSEF and the Observatoire frequently collaborate with African scholars and institutions, African perspectives may only gain some visibility throughout the Northern academic pipeline. Critiques from African linguists and scholars are downplayed or marginalized in official reports and publications at La Francophonie (Humbert, 2023a; 2023b). The linguistic governmentality and ideology making the quantification of francophones possible is guided by converging LPP interests in some Northern institutions. La Francophonie needs these numbers to prove its existence to itself and to the world, interpreting figures on francophones and French to guide and legitimate their diplomatic actions around the globe. The ideology of multilingualism is salient: institutions do not capitalize much on 'native speakers' (although they remain representative of a central linguistic norm, a core point of comparison), but they want to know where and how to invest to keep expanding the growth of speakers who are assumed to be capable enough of communicating in French. The idea that Africa has full potential for converting multilingual speakers into francophones is also salient in the emergence of specific Canadian LPP interests.

Indeed, some of the estimates quoted above were financed directly by Immigration and Citizenship Canada. The governmental institution in charge of regulating in and out migrations charged with 'identif[ying] potential pools and five specific [African] countries from which to recruit French-speaking economic immigrants in Canada outside Quebec' (ODSEF, 2017, p. iv). As such, knowing where francophones are now and are likely to be in the future has more concrete politico-economic value for Canada, whose LPP is expected to boost the use of French across the country. The Quebec demolinguistic discourses and expertise on quantifying francophones locally find their way into international statistical and LPP projects: defining, counting, and quantifying all the 'francophones' is understood as an imperative practice both for Canadian-based and La Francophonie institutions. As seen above, these potential francophone resources are mostly believed to be found in Africa, where Northern partners are expected to help foster education to convert them into potential business partners or workforce.

However, France and Switzerland do not share the Canadian interest in attracting African francophones in their country, and Canada is not interested in attracting just 'any' francophone, but only those who are skilled workers. Thus, a major part of the process of quantification engaged by actors and institutions associated with La Francophonie is anchored in institutional practices that subordinate African francophone speakers and institutions to Northern LPP interests. Although scholars involved at the Observatoire and ODSEF have no intention of imposing a colonial gaze, the Northern statistical infrastructure and the LPPs' aims converging interests in funding the quantifying bodies leave little room for Southern academic and political views on the process, thus reproducing colonialist logics under modern capitalistic, globalizing rules.

## **(Not) counting francophones across nations for converging or diverging LPP purposes**

This worldwide journey into the language governmentalities and ideologies that make the quantification of ‘francophones’ (im)possible illustrates how LPP and language quantification intertwine. The category ‘francophone’ is loaded with different meanings and contrasting intentions across statistical and LPP practices. Certainly discourses end up impacting numbers too, but reading into who produces them under what conditions, with what politico-economic interests, tells us more about what it means (not) to count francophones as speakers involved in LPP projects including French. From France to La Francophonie, the management of power relations stretches on a spectrum of ideologies, between a tendency to foster *monolingual* practices in society to that of promoting *multilingual* practices which are believed to boost the use of French worldwide. No matter how people (do not) talk about (not) counting francophones, some seek to maintain a certain political power for French in all four contexts, without constantly seeing the same potential in all francophones. When we compare the ideological charge of the category ‘francophone’ across contexts, we begin to see how actors and institutions navigate the spectrum of ideologies. This comparison gives very contrasting pictures of how francophones are assumed to be part of LPPs. ‘Francophones’ may index an idealized ‘perfect knowledge’ of French language to ethnocultural and geopolitical references (ethnicity, nationality, biological heritage, territory etc.), i.e. to something speakers are assumed to be *born with* or are not likely to learn like other native speakers (e.g. Switzerland’s ‘main language(s)’ and Canada’s ‘mother tongue’). On the other side of the spectrum, ‘francophones’ may index a knowledge of French that is supposed to be ‘good enough to communicate,’ embodied by imagined (and often exoticized) second or foreign-language speakers of French who were not born with the language but prove that anyone can *become* a francophone by learning French in schools (e.g. France’s gaze outside its mainland borders to find ‘francophones’ and La Francophonie’s communicative approach). In the most extreme case seen with La Francophonie, among the various estimates, ‘francophones’ may include whole populations who do not speak any French nor are aware of being part of La Francophonie.

The native speaker ideology tends to bind the category ‘francophone’ to more territorial LPP matters, such as those observed in Switzerland and Canada: counting as a francophone is a matter of being able to promote LPPs which secure the use of French as a minority language in the nation. Some francophones are more likely to relate to these statistics, because the numbers may impact their everyday language practices and accesses to services (education, businesses, job market, etc.). However, this way of conceptualizing speakers also legitimizes simplistic monolingual representations in societies, i.e. the belief that despite widespread multilingualism, each speaker needs to fit the national puzzle of linguistic diversity as a rather monolingual piece of it.

The ideology of multilingualism tends to connect ‘francophone’ to more diverse and mobile and multilingual speakers, such as those observed in La Francophonie: counting as a francophone in this case is not something ‘functional francophones’ are likely to be aware of, since they have not necessarily been asked any language question that is linked to these specific statistical results. As such, sociolinguistic variability includes a wider range of criteria, blurring the lines between francophones who were born with French

and those who learned it somehow later in life, highlighting and celebrating every single trace of French which is believed to exist in the world without acknowledging the inequalities that still persist among those ‘same’ speakers.

Governmentality sketches how these ideologies operationalize in more contrasted ways. It is also embodied in francophone statisticians’ practices. Across the four contexts, we notice important differences in how they (do not) get involved. French statisticians keep some distance with the topic: language is not really an issue that needs further quantitative investigations, and counting francophones in France is barely discussed. Apart from a few exceptions, Swiss francophone statisticians are hardly identifiable, i.e. they do not try to foster a French-speaking community of statistical practice whose purpose would be to focus on French and francophones. Canadian francophone statisticians manage most of the quantitative work, both nationally and internationally. Quantifying French is fully part of a historicized socio-political practice tightly bound to evolving LPP struggles, whose aim is to defend French from being erased by Anglicization nationally. Strikingly, Quebec and Canadian francophones manage to transfer both their demolinguistic expertise and LPP claims against Anglicization onto the international stage with their intense engagement in La Francophonie’s institutions.

La Francophonie crystallizes the major points of convergence and divergence through quantifying and LPP practices. All four contexts converge in this celebration of French. For France, Canadian and Swiss national francophones, and La Francophonie, it is important to keep proving and believing that French is an international diplomatic language, and that it is still present throughout the world. Divergences are precisely observed in the ways institutions from the three countries (do not) take part in a common quantification process at La Francophonie, and in how they diverge in interpreting the quantitative work on francophones for personal LPP purposes. If Canadian francophones quantify French and francophones around the world, with Africa as the main target of quantification, it is also with Canadian LPP interests in developing the educational conditions in Africa to attract skilled francophone workers to Canada with return on investment. France and Switzerland do not actively seek to attract those skilled African francophones, but France still supports their counting at La Francophonie with more representational political ambitions in mind, i.e. to cultivate diplomatic connections.

African institutions remain mute throughout the quantification and LPP discussions. The absence of African institutions, along with the rare publications of African scholars contradicting La Francophonie’s knowledge in La Francophonie’s scientific outputs (cf. Humbert, 2023a; 2023b), exacerbate the process of subordination of African francophones, who are all placed under the same category of speaker for LPP purposes that continue to represent sociolinguistic and politico-economic profit for the francophone North, but less clearly for the South.

All in all, francophones end up being measured and valued very differently across regional, national and international lines. We can hardly understand what their numbers mean to whom without analyzing the language ideologies and governmentalities feeding debates and legitimizing networks. The point of doing so is not to prove that we should distrust numbers (as already suggested by Busch, 2016 for example), but to highlight the imperative for LPP scholars and officials to try to decode what political and scientific discourses guide language quantification

processes, and who wants to produce what LPP project with(out) numbers, with what consequences for whom. As such, tracing back the debates discussing the absence of numbers (e.g. France) is as much telling of LPP as focusing on long-established quantitative practices (e.g. Switzerland and Canada), which all may as well end up in unexpected international alliances trying to reframe colonialist LPP with statistics (e.g. La Francophonie).

### **Conclusion: quantifying languages as a political and politicized practice**

So yes, there may be 22.8% or 67% francophones in Switzerland. Having a quick look at the definitions and methods used to produce these contradictory numbers explains the massive gap. Nevertheless, merely modifying wordings or sampling techniques is, in my view, insufficient for understanding what language statistics mean to whom and how their production intertwines with LPP discourses. Analyzing language ideologies proves to be useful for understanding how speakers and languages are conceived of in linguistically diverse societies, by whom, and with what potential resistances or strategies to make certain ideas hegemonic with(out) statistical backup. Analyzing governmentality helps understanding how ideologies materialize to mobilize resources and expertise in language quantification across institutional networks that might transcend national boundaries.

Altogether, these concepts display a reading grid of the discourses embodied in the process of quantification of languages and throughout LPP debates: talking about how to quantify languages and speakers necessarily implies talking about their role in the political economy, i.e. thinking in terms of linguistic and politico-economic resource redistribution. In many cases, redistribution is not even, and should be replaced by the word ‘exploitation,’ reminding us that knowledge production and LPP strategies are connected to managing power relations among speakers and languages (del Percio et al. 2016). Reading methodologies through the lens of these concepts shows that any quest for producing ‘objective’ knowledge on languages is in tension with LPP interests, which are never neutral. As such, this article invites linguists, officials, statisticians, activists, or whoever is consulting statistics on languages for language planning or policy purposes, to read the historical and methodological literature before interpreting the numbers. Not with the aim of understanding how to produce better language statistics or simply reject their relevance, but with the intention of spotting LPP injunctions or blind spots while reading language quantification as a political rather than a scientific practice.

### **Notes**

1. All translations are mine except when specified otherwise.
2. « capable de parler en français, quel que soit son niveau ou sa maîtrise d’autres compétences, comme l’écriture ou la lecture. »
3. « juger de la qualité de ‘sa’ langue pratiquée par un autre. »

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