

Some Tips on Language Etiquette in Montréal

by VICTOR ARMONY | Université du Québec à Montréal | armony.victor@uqam.edu

Language is an extremely sensitive issue in Québec. The strong “sovereignist” movement, which advocates the separation of Québec from Canada through democratic means, places the protection of the French language at the very top of its priorities. Many French-speaking people in Québec feel self-conscious and defensive about their language, particularly in relation to English-speaking North Americans. That’s why a few tips on language etiquette may come in handy when visiting Montréal.

Canada has two official languages at the federal level: English and French. However, except New Brunswick, each Canadian province has only one official language. French is Québec’s official language. About 80 percent of its population is “francophone” (French is their native tongue or the main language spoken at home). In Montréal, French-speakers represent almost 70 percent of the population (it’s the second largest French-speaking city in the world, after Paris). In the downtown area, most people in the service sector speak English (as a first or second or even third language). Nevertheless, outside places specifically catering to tourists and international visitors (e.g. hotels, conference halls, etc.), it is considered common courtesy to ask “Do you speak English?” when addressing someone in that language. Any effort made by a visitor to use some French during an interaction with French speakers—even if only a “Bonjour” or a “Merci”—is generally perceived as a friendly gesture and elicits an equally friendly response.

Québec is pronounced “keh-BECK” in French and “kuh-BECK” in English. The adjective in French is “Québécois,” pronounced “keh-beh-KWA” (the “s” is silent). In English, two forms are usual: “Quebecer” (more common) and “Quebecker.” However, many English-speaking citizens of Québec have adopted

the French word “Québécois” in written and verbal communication and it is considered culturally sensitive to do so. In Spanish, the adjective is “Quebequense,” but many Spanish-speaking Quebecers also use “Québécois.” Some of them prefer the more familiar term “Quebeco” (but please note that, while this word is not intentionally derogatory, it might be interpreted as such by a French-speaking person).

The proper name of the city is *Montréal*, with an (acute) accent on the “e.” The word comes from “Mont Royal,” or “Royal Mount,” the big hill located in the middle of Montréal Island. When uttered in French, it sounds like “Monray-AL,” pronounced with a guttural “r” (although some older French-speaking Montrealers use the rolling “r”). Contrary to what some assume, the “t” is never silent when saying the city’s name in English or Spanish. In English, there are two ways of pronouncing it. English-speaking Montrealers tend to say “MUN-treal,” while most Americans say (incorrectly in the opinion of some Anglophone Montrealers) “MAWN-treal” or “MAHN-treal.”

The Québécois are known for their hospitality and warmth. They feel strongly about their own language and cultural heritage, but that should not be construed as an intolerant attitude towards outsiders. Actually, many of them love to discuss politics, and they will enthusiastically engage a conversation with a foreigner about Québec’s history and current affairs. ■