CANADIAN FRENCH
A Québécois Phrasebook

A fun and practical phrasebook for visitors and residents
Hundreds of colourful everyday expressions, with their meanings in standard French and English
Phonetic transcriptions to help you understand
Sidebar on Québécois culture and linguistic particularities

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Lodging and the Home p. 95
Eating In and Out p. 107
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Canadian FRENCH
A Québécois Phrasebook

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Elk and fallow deer in Omega Park.
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INTRODUCTION

Part of what makes travelling fun is getting to hear, speak and learn different languages. Granted, Canada’s two official languages, French and English, are not the most exotic of tongues, but the country’s rich tapestry of traditions and landscapes has made them unique in their own way.

It goes without saying that French, like all languages, has its own share of nuances and subtleties, not to mention regional variations. These will become more obvious to you as you listen to locals, no matter what province you find yourself in: Québec, the largest French-speaking territory on the globe; Manitoba, home of a strong Franco-Manitoban population; the Maritimes, land of the proud Acadian people, descendants of the first French-speaking settlers in North America; or any other province in the country.

This guide to Canadian French is primarily aimed at English-speakers with some knowledge of French. Although we do touch on the history and typical expressions of Canada’s other francophone regions, this guide mainly focuses on the French spoken in the province of Québec. This province is the cradle of the French language in Canada and is home to some six million French speakers.

Some schools of thought have attempted to relegate Québécois French to the status of unnatural by-product, or “poor cousin,” of the mother tongue—in other words, the French spoken in France. But unnatural it is not: Québécois French is its own entity, with its own vocabulary and phonetics. Nor is it some sort
of unsophisticated, back-woods patois or uneducated slang; in Québec, distinctly Québécois features can be found at all levels of language, from friendly chats to boardrooms and debates in the National Assembly. That said, you might be surprised to see that everyday Québécois, whether it is in the workplace, the tourism industry or the media, does not differ that much from “standard” French. To hear the major differences, better to turn to Québécois films, songs and literature, as these forms of artistic expression in recent decades sought to assert the province’s unique linguistic identity. You also may or may not be familiar with the term *joual* (a way of pronouncing *cheval*, “horse”), which designates a type of Québécois French historically spoken by working-class Montrealers; this word is still occasionally used but no longer refers to the language in its entirety.

**A BIT OF HISTORY**

**Québécois French**

French colonization of Québec dates back to the early 17th century. Contrary to popular belief, the first settlers of New France were not illiterate peasants but rather (for the most part) educated artisans and labourers from urban regions such as Poitou and Normandy. This is actually quite remarkable since the literacy rate in France in those days was only about 20%. In addition, the settlers were accustomed to middle-class society and were familiar with “central” French — the language of administration — even though they spoke their own regional dialects, of which there were thousands scattered throughout the French countryside.
In the early days of the settlement, “a wide array of regional languages and French dialects coexisted. Those that differed from French to the point of hindering communication were doomed to extinction, while those that resembled it enough to make communication possible were maintained by their speakers” (R. Mougeon and É. Beniak, *Les origines du français québécois*, Presses de l’Université Laval, 1994; our translation). Norman dialects had the most marked impact on Québécois French; they are the source of several Canadian terms and expressions.

**NEW WORLD, OLD LANGUAGE**

Many of the words that the Québécois (and other francophones around the world) use every day but that are unknown in France are in fact survivals: as Québécois evolved separately from the French of France, it kept alive words that have since become archaic in the mother country. Some examples are *écarter* instead of *perdre* or *égarer* (to lose), *dispensieux* instead of *cher* (expensive), *peignure* instead of *coiffure* (hairstyle), or *rapport à* instead of *à cause de* or *parce que* (because).

Furthermore, the very nature of the colony, whose development required constant social and commercial interactions between settlers originating from different regions of France, soon resulted in an unusual cohesion and convergence of language. Consequently, it wasn’t long before Québec had a strongly unified language that was much less variable than in the motherland.
This standardization, which occurred in the late 17th century, apparently followed the lines of conventional French, which was spoken by the colony’s elite but also, and perhaps especially, by most women who had settled in the New World. These women educated their children in French and therefore played a key role in establishing the language.

Still, a number of terms and pronunciations fiercely resisted the systematic move toward normalized French. Gradually, additional regionalisms appeared throughout the entire territory and survive to this day. Obviously, as soon as a diverse French population began to develop miles away from the old country, confronting realities and requirements that were very different from its past experience, its language headed in a new direction. In addition, since quick and efficient means of communication would not be created for another two centuries, the decisions and choices made on one side of the ocean took quite a while to reach the other.

Other factors explain certain fundamental divergences in the 18th and 19th centuries between Québécois French and “central” French, particularly in terms of grammatical constructions. Early New France had very few schools and little access to the written word, since books were rare, as were other printed text (notices, signs, etc.) in the rural areas where most settlers lived. As a result, many “intuitive” constructions, though they might not be considered “proper” according to standard grammar authorities, spread freely and, in some places, left an indelible mark.

We cannot ignore the contribution of Aboriginal peoples who, having inhabited the country thousands of years before the French, had already named many places, animals, plants and
foods. The English, who wasted no time following the French to the Canadian territory, also left a legacy that is still quite evident in Québécois French. In fact, the conquest of New France by Britain in 1759 severed Québec’s ties to France and to European French so dramatically that French Canada did not directly take part in the evolution of European French for nearly two centuries. During this time, the French language in Canada lived side by side with English, borrowing from its commercial and technical vocabulary. Today, the province’s eight million inhabitants are surrounded by some 300 million English speakers living in the United States and the rest of Canada. With its rich past and proud people, this resilient language is a true survivor.

**Acadian French**

Acadian French is the variety of French that is spoken in Canada’s Atlantic provinces. It differs not only from “standard” French but also from all other dialects spoken in Canada, which more closely resemble Québécois.

The first Acadian settlers travelled from all corners of France but were mostly from the country’s western region. Today, nearly half of all Acadians can trace their roots to that area, which is why there are major differences between Québécois and Acadian French; indeed, less than a third of all Québécois are descended from settlers from western France.

Several factors influenced the development of Acadian French. In 1710, the British seized Acadia from the French, renamed it Nova Scotia and founded Halifax in 1749. A few years later, Governor Charles Lawrence, fearing that the Acadians were still loyal to France and posed a threat of rebellion, ordered them
expelled from the territory. Three quarters of the population were deported and the rest fled. Upon their return several years later, they became geographically isolated, lacked linguistic rights and were surrounded by hostile English speakers, but they were able to prevent assimilation by forming French-speaking enclaves throughout the Atlantic provinces. The distance between these small communities, however, and their minority situation in a sea of anglophones, created many differences within Acadian French itself. It is interesting to note that these dialectical varieties do not correspond to provincial borders or city limits but rather to generations and socio-economic realities.

The province of New Brunswick boasts several regional dialects. In the northern region, the proximity of Québec has resulted in a strong influence of Québécois French and the use of English terms is rather limited. In the south, however, the situation is different: it is said that the French spoken here is the most representative of Acadian French. It is composed of two dialects: the first is traditional and the second, known as chiac, is spoken by younger Acadians. Chiac is the result of close contact with the anglophone community, especially in the urban setting of Moncton, and combines French, English and “old French.” More than anywhere else in Acadia, switching from French to English and vice versa while conversing is quite common here.

Unlike the Québécois, Acadians don’t have the benefit of living under a single government, willing to protect their language. It is subjected to four different provincial jurisdictions (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and, to a lesser extent, Newfoundland and Labrador); however, the majority of the Acadian and French-speaking community, some 240,000
inhabitants, lives in New Brunswick, which is officially bilingual. Today, French speakers represent over 20% of the total Atlantic population; in New Brunswick, that number rises to 32.5%.

THE REST OF CANADA

Ontario

The French presence in Ontario dates back some 350 years, to the establishment of Catholic missions in 1649 and 1742. Around 1880, francophones settled in the heart of the province, then in the northern regions in the early 20th century. Over the last 40 years, Ontario’s francophone community has been enriched by the arrival of francophones from Europe, the West Indies, Asia and Africa.

Today, Ontario’s francophone community numbers 561,000, representing 4.4% of the province’s population. Although French speakers are scattered throughout Ontario, most make their homes in the eastern part of the province. Ontario has over 350 French elementary and secondary schools, two bilingual universities, two bilingual university colleges and three francophone community colleges.

The Prairies and Western Canada

French-Canadian “Voyageurs” from Lower Canada came to this region in the 18th century, having followed the route mapped by the explorer La Vérendrye. Many of them married Aboriginal women, and their children became known as the Métis. French continued to be the language of the Roman Catholic clergy after they arrived in the Red River Colony in 1818, and the colony’s
capital, Saint-Boniface (now part of the city of Winnipeg), is still the francophone hub of Manitoba. Several decades later, francophones arrived from Québec and New England, as well as France, Belgium and Switzerland. Although they are small, the French-speaking communities of these provinces are alive and well, boasting French-speaking associations, community centres, schools, businesses, television and radio stations, and newspapers.

Manitoba’s francophones represent some 4% of the provincial population. The official status of the French language in Manitoba was re-established in 1979 and Franco-Manitoban school governance was won in 1993.

In Saskatchewan, the Fransaskois community is scattered north of Saskatoon and south of Regina. In 1968, francophones’ rights to education in French were recognized, and in 1993, they were given authority to administer their own schools.

For its part, Alberta’s francophones number approximately 81,000 and are scattered throughout the entire province. The French fur-traders and missionaries were the first to settle parts of Northern Alberta and town names such as Rivière-qui-Barre, St-Paul and St-Albert are a testament to the French presence. Here, there are 20 French-language schools and several bilingual college and university programs.

In 1793, six French-Canadians travelled with Alexander Mackenzie to British Columbia. Francophones settled here permanently early in the colony’s history, eventually outnumbering anglophones. However, the gold rush at the end of the 19th century brought so many immigrants that francophones became a minority. In 1909,
the small francophone community of Maillardville was founded, but it was only in 1996 that Franco-Columbians officially formed a French-language school board.

**The North**

As they did in the West and North, francophones came to the Yukon Territory with the fur trade and the Catholic missions. Today, the population of the Yukon barely exceeds 35,000 people, about 4.8% of whom speak French.

There was a French presence as early as 1665 in the present-day Northwest Territories, as Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médart Chouart dit Des Groseillers, were responsible for founding the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670. The first non-Aboriginal person to reach Great Slave Lake was Laurent Leroux, a francophone. In 1786, he established the Fort Resolution trading post and, in 1789, he and other francophones accompanied Alexander Mackenzie on their Mackenzie River expedition.

The 19th century brought European missions; francophones made up half the population, the other half being Aboriginal peoples. Francophones here, who number about 1,100 and are known as Franco-Ténois, must fight to preserve their culture. In 1984, the Government of the Northwest Territories passed legislation conferring official language status on eight languages, including French.

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