"Neutrality"?: Exploring ideologies of language and belonging in Quebec’s proposed Charter of (secular) Values

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Canada, at the federal level, has an official bilingual language policy. Since the 1970s, however, the province of Quebec has had only one official language, French. Despite receiving their schooling in French, as per Bill 101 (French language policy), Montrealers from immigrant-origin backgrounds are acutely aware of the importance of English. As a result, this population is often fluently trilingual (French, English, and a heritage language), making Montreal among the most multilingual cities in North America (Pagé & Lamarre, 2010). This multilingualism is often characterized by competing and often conflicting linguistic and cultural allegiances, where identities are negotiated across a range of multilingual contexts (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Thus, the multiethnic metropolis of Montreal offers particular opportunities and challenges for sociolinguistic research on multilingualism and language ideologies. This is especially true in the context of the current provincial government’s proposed Charter of Values. The government claims that the charter aims to "secularize" the province by banning religious head-wear and "conspicuous" symbols for public workers. This ban on visible and religious minorities is couched in a language of neutrality. In this presentation, we examine how this facade of neutrality frames and limits the possible language and identity experiences of Montrealers. Against the backdrop of the proposed Charter and in light of Quebec’s language policy, we argue that ideologies of language are not about language alone. We will explore how belief systems related to language, or language ideologies (Silverstein, 1998), are tied up with ideologies of race, culture, religion, and readings of visible difference or socially constructed ‘otherness’. As scholars working in areas of multilingualism, minority language education, and language ideologies, we will draw on these perspectives to inform understandings of the intersections of language, race, identity, place, and belonging.

Keywords: language ideologies, visible minorities, multilingualism.