ARISTOTLE NOTES

The State of Canadian Society

Languages in Canada: Evolving realities



Ven Venkatachalam | November 2026

Why language matters:

Language is more than the primary means of human communication; it also shapes how we think and act. Thus, language forms culture and, in turn, plays a vital role in shaping a nation's identity and fostering unity among its people. Language is central to cultural heritage, democratic inclusivity, and effective governance. However, it is even more critical in Canada, given two policy extremes: (1) illiberal language laws that privilege one shrinking minority group over all other Canadians, and (2) the increasing accommodation of myriad non-official languages in official documents and government services at taxpayers' expense.

Though indigenous languages have a rich history (with over 70 spoken across the country), English and French are Canada's two founding, and thus official, languages. These two languages represent the mother tongue of nearly 77 percent of Canadians. Although dominant, this share has fallen considerably from its 1901 census high of 91.5 percent. Since the early 1980s, the share of the population whose mother tongue is neither an official nor an indigenous language has nearly doubled.

The proportion of Canadians whose mother tongue is English has historically hovered around 59 percent of the population, with a high above 62 percent in the 1911 census, a low of 56.5 percent in 1941, and 56.6 percent in the most recent census in 2021 (see Table 1). By contrast, the share of people whose mother tongue is a non-official language has risen from 8 percent in 1901 to over 23 percent today. Consequently, one in five Canadians has French as their mother tongue, down from nearly one third in 1901.

TABLE 1

Share of population by official language, Canada, 1901–2021

Year	English	French	Non-official languages
1901	61.0	30.5	8.4
1911	62.3	27.7	10.1
1921	60.0	27.0	13.1
1931	57.5	27.6	14.9
1941	56.5	29.2	14.3
1951	59.1	29.0	11.8
1961	58.5	28.1	13.5
1971	60.1	26.9	13.0
1981	61.4	25.7	13.0
1991	60.4	24.3	15.3
2001	59.1	22.9	18.0
2011	57.8	21.7	20.6
2021	56.6	20.2	23.2

Source: Statistics Canada, 2023a.

In absolute numbers, as of 2021, 20.7 million people in Canada report English as their mother tongue, 7.4 million report French, and 8.4 million report a non-official language.

The number and composition of various non-official languages have also grown considerably. The 2021 census recorded around 200 languages as mother tongues. At the start of the 20th century, immigrant languages were limited primarily to European languages, as shown in Table 2.

After the Second World War, German immigration increased. In contrast, Ukrainian immigration declined slightly, and Canada welcomed nearly half a million Italians and a growing variety of immigrants, especially from southern Europe. But the English share of the population held fairly steady, as Canada also experienced considerable immigration from the Anglosphere in the post-war decades. Only in the early 1980s did the non-official-language share of the population begin its prolonged ascent.

The 2021 census reflects Canada's considerable immigration in recent decades—predominantly from Asia and, to a lesser degree, Latin America. Chinese is the mother tongue of nearly 1.3 million people in Canada: nearly six times as many as a generation ago (1981) and nearly 40 times as many as in 1941. Almost 670,000 Canadians speak Punjabi as their mother tongue, an increase of more than 12 times in 40 years. Over half a million people in Canada speak Spanish and Arabic as their mother tongue—growing nearly seven times and over 10 times, respectively, in four decades (see Table 3).

TABLE 2

Mother tongue of the Canadian population, early selected immigrants

Year	Dutch	German	Greek	Italian	Polish	Russian	Ukrainian
1901	–	152,455	–	6,245	5,700	15,240	7,460
1911	5,455	222,370	–	40,925	40,110	42,185	57,520
1921	34,005	275,375	–	53,410	59,000	57,720	131,120
1931	44,580	368,850	7,350	85,520	118,600	50,760	252,800
1941	67,770	331,660	8,745	80,260	128,710	52,435	313,275
1951	100,560	329,305	8,035	92,240	129,235	39,225	352,325
1961	184,480	563,710	40,455	339,625	161,720	42,900	361,500
1971	171,275	558,965	103,730	538,765	136,540	31,955	309,890
1981	158,470	515,510	123,230	531,290	127,400	31,355	285,115
1991	139,035	466,245	126,205	510,995	189,815	35,305	187,015
2001	133,040	455,545	126,370	493,990	215,010	96,910	157,385
2011	116,285	430,055	117,890	437,725	201,240	169,950	120,265
2021	79,275	235,260	93,070	315,760	160,465	196,970	83,510

Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 and Statistics Canada, 2023b. **Note:** Data that is unavailable is indicated by a dash (–).

TABLE 3

Mother tongue of the Canadian population, recently selected immigrants

Year	Chinese	Persian	Punjabi	Urdu	Vietnamese	Tagalog	Spanish	Arabic	Portuguese
1971	95,915	-	-	-	-	-	23,945	28,520	85,840
1981	224,135	-	53,770	11,925	28,380	-	70,150	49,645	164,615
1991	498,845	40,625	136,460	24,900	78,565	99,715	177,425	107,750	212,090
2001	872,400	96,510	284,750	86,805	126,760	199,770	260,785	220,535	222,855
2011	1,112,610	177,010	459,990	194,100	153,355	384,055	439,110	374,415	225,530
2021	1,289,140	263,205	667,795	233,190	172,790	463,190	536,460	509,105	239,010

Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 and Statistics Canada, 2023b. **Note:** Data that is unavailable is indicated by a dash (-).

References

"The Evolution of Language Populations in Canada, by Mother Tongue, from 1901 to 2016," Statistics Canada, 2018, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2018001-eng.htm.

"Table 15-10-0031-01—Population by mother tongue and geography, 1951 to 2021", Statistics Canada, 2023a, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1510003101.

"Table 98-10-0618-01—Mother tongue by immigrant status and period of immigration and number of languages known: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with parts," Statistics Canada, 2023b, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810061801.

About Aristotle Notes

Aristotle Notes is a series of concise, accessible fact sheets designed to inform public dialogue and elevate everyday discussions. By delivering clear, reliable data and essential context, these notes equip media professionals, students, and citizens alike with the facts needed to navigate complex topics in our society.

About us

The Aristotle Foundation's mission is to champion reason, democracy, and civilization so that all can participate in a free, flourishing Canada.

www.aristotlefoundation.org