

Grilled-cheese, cocktail among terms now deemed OK by Quebec's language watchdog

OQLF's new approach reflects fact younger people 'don't seem to perceive English as such a menace,' prof says

By Benjamin Shingler, CBC News

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Long seen as a staunch defender of the French language, Quebec's language watchdog has softened its approach to anglicisms, now deeming terms like "grilled-cheese," "cocktail" and "softball" as acceptable for everyday usage.

The Office québécois de la langue française signalled the shift in a report posted to its website earlier this year.

Among the terms now viewed as acceptable:

Grilled-cheese (with hyphen) can be used instead of sandwich au fromage fondant.

Baby-boom can be used instead of bébé-boum.

Cocktail can be used instead of coquetel.

Softball can be used instead of balle-molle.

Smash, a term in tennis, can be used instead of coup d'écrasement.

Leader can be used instead of chef, to describe, for instance, a politician.

Language is 'vivant'

Jean-Pierre Le Blanc, a spokesperson for the OQLF, said the revised policy is meant to reflect the evolution of how French is used in Quebec. "Language is something that is vivant," he said in an interview. "The phenomenon of borrowing from other languages has been going on for a long time."

The OQLF, established in 1961 and strengthened under the 1977 Charter of the French Language, is mandated to protect the language and ensure its proper usage in the province. It now has a staff of more than 230, including more than 20 linguists, and an annual budget of \$24 million. The OQLF's grand dictionnaire terminologique, a resource for translators, academics and everyday citizens, gets 19 million hits a year.

The office has, in some cases, been successful in introducing French alternatives to ubiquitous English words, such as courriel as an alternative to email and mot-clic as an alternative to hashtag. Others, like the cumbersome sandwich au fromage fondant, haven't taken hold.

In the past, the office has been criticized for what some viewed as overzealous enforcement, such as when an Italian restaurant was targeted for using Italian words — including "pasta" — on its menu.

Under the change in policy, though, restaurants will be free to offer up "grilled-cheese" on their menus without fear of sanction.

The change underscores a point that Pascal Salzman has been making for awhile now. Salzman owns Le Cheese, a restaurant that specializes in gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches that was targeted by the OQLF a few years ago. He opted to trademark his business's logo to get around the office's concerns with the name. From the start, he felt the office was over-zealous in its approach to protecting French.

"I grew up in Montreal, I went to French elementary school and English high school, I'm French, and it's "un cheeseburger, un grilled cheese" — that's what it is in Quebec, unfortunately," he told CBC.

"I'm all for preserving the French language and culture — I think it's a great initiative — however, I don't think using the word 'grilled cheese' is going to destroy that heritage."

The changes aren't sitting well with some linguists.

Marie-Éva de Villers, author of the *Multidictionnaire de la langue française*, said the OQLF should revisit its decision because it doesn't fit within its mandate.

"The role of the organization — defined by the charter, one that hasn't been modified — is to be a user's guide, to orient users. It's not up to them to describe the historic evolution of the language," she told Radio-Canada.

Chantal Bouchard, a sociolinguist at McGill University, had a different take, suggesting the OQLF "figured that Quebecers were now ready for opening up a little bit about the English words."

She said Quebec is becoming more like France, where English expressions are more commonplace in everyday language.

"Younger people probably feel more at ease with French and they are more bilingual and they don't seem to perceive English as such a menace or as threatening as they used to," she said.