

The Decline and Fall of the Arrêt/Stop Sign **Tracking and Studying a Disappearing Artifact**

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Abstract: Among the English and French stop signs all across Montreal, there exists the occasional bilingual 'Arrêt/Stop' sign. Arrêt/Stop signs typically display significant amounts of damage, vandalism, and wear, including heavy weathering, and are in the minority wherever they are found. This paper provides a detailed analysis of Arrêt/Stop signs that seeks to explain why, in a bilingual city like Montreal, bilingual stop signs are so rare. The data collected from the 'Stop: Toutes Directions' project shows that, at some point or points in the past, each community within Montreal chose to abandon bilingual signage in favour of one language or the other, but why specifically this happened remains unknown.

Introduction

On August 26, 1977, the Quebec government passed Bill 101, otherwise known as the Charter of the French Language. Reflecting the nationalist sentiment that had come to dominate provincial politics, Bill 101 declared French the only official language of Quebec, and set in motion a process of policing and regulating public language use that continues to this day. While in most parts of the province, where Anglophones are either in the severe minority or absent altogether, this transition has gone relatively smoothly, the island of Montreal has been a notable exception. All across the island, where Anglophones and Francophones have lived side-by-side, to varying degrees, for hundreds of years, the language laws have had only limited success, and if anything simply aggravated pre-existing French-English tensions.

Looking back over its 397-year history, it's easy to see why the city of Montreal has what could be thought of as linguistic neurosis. French and English divisions, especially during the earliest years of Canadian nationhood, have often mirrored class differences, with the wealthier English cordoning themselves off from the French in communities like Westmount or Outremont, and sticking to English schools and universities like McGill. In essence, the language barrier masked an underlying socioeconomic barrier, a ripe environment for the rise of nationalism and cultural tension.

Much of this was set-off, however, by the waves of immigrants from around the world that arrived in Montreal throughout the 20th century. The city itself, despite the linguistic tension that perpetually bubbled under its surface, developed into a vibrant cosmopolitan cultural centre, respecting and accepting a wide variety of lifestyles. French-English relations within Montreal benefited from this development, and as a result the island has maintained its bilingual nature within a staunchly monolingual province. Nevertheless, Montreal's strange and complex relationship with language is unique to the island itself, and certainly a topic worthy of anthropological inquiry.

An excellent place to start a detailed examination of language in Montreal is public signage, and in particular, the curious nature of stop signs within the city. In 1987, the Quebec government passed a regulation requiring that all stop signs, throughout the province, say "Arrêt", as opposed to the more traditional "Stop". Compliance, however, is not yet mandatory, and varies considerably from area to area. The boroughs and municipalities of Montreal, which each manage their own public works, are each free to pursue their own course of action concerning signage. In regions like Westmount, where the population is predominantly Anglophone, the stop signs have remained in English, whereas in other neighbourhoods, like the Plateau, the signs have been entirely replaced. The "Stop: Toutes Directions" project, of which this paper is a part, is an attempt to understand why this is, based on an in-depth and lengthy analysis of

the language and features of over 2800 stop signs throughout the city. While the work of my colleagues, in this respect, is likely to be illuminating, I have decided to focus my attention on a more elusive and lesser-known third sign, the "Arrêt/Stop". These signs are interesting for two reasons: one, Arrêt/Stop signs can be seen as an effort to accommodate both languages equally, an unnecessary (anyone with a driver's license is able to interpret the meaning of a red octagon, regardless of language) but diplomatic effort on the part of the sign-maker, and two, most Arrêt/Stop signs are extraordinarily worn. Many are faded, lack luminescence (which virtually all other stop signs do have), and look somewhat sad and dejected next to the shinier, brighter Arrêt or Stop signs around them. While our field data does not normally include date of installation, it is clear that the rare Arrêt/Stop sign still scattered across the Montreal landscape is not a sign (no pun intended) of things to come, but a symbol of an approach to language relations that may be on its way out.

The Arrêt/Stop Sign: Some Basics

Out of the 2816 stop signs that we surveyed across 7 distinct communities (Westmount, Ville-Marie, Cote-des-Neiges, Cote-Saint-Luc, Hampstead, Notre-Dame-de-Grace, and Plateau) within Montreal, only 7.88% (222) of them were Arrêt/Stop signs. Of those, 27 were located on private (ie. not maintained by the City of Montreal) property, such as parking lots, back alleys and university campuses. Compared to the 1522 Arrêt Signs and 1013 Stop Signs within our area of collection, the Arrêt/Stop signs were in the clear minority. In some communities, such as the Plateau, there were absolutely none, while they were the most abundant, proportionally speaking, within the two communities that were the furthest to the northwest in our area of study (Hampstead and Cote-Saint-Luc). As Figure 1 shows, they exist in small quantities regardless of the community. It should also be noted that in each community, one or the other language is starkly dominant – in some cases, the second language is even less common within the borough than Arrêt/Stop signs are.

During the data collection process, each stop sign that was identified was assigned four values to classify its post-depositional features (ie. signs of age and deterioration): Damage, or dents and tears in the sign, wear, or faded-out lettering, signs of scratching or scrubbing, vandalism front, which covered stickers, stencils, spray-paint and marker concealing some or all of the front of the sign, and vandalism back. The extent of these four factors present on each sign were assessed by the individual teams of surveyors, and given a number ranging from 0 (nothing) to 3 (significant/severe). These four values have since been combined into a "Total Damage Rating", a value that approximates, as best as possible considering the amount of interpretive bias inherent in such a scheme, the amount of wear and tear a sign has. A total damage rating provides two pieces of information to us about stop signs in general, and Arrêt/Stop signs in particular. First, they provide a general sense of the overall state of Arrêt/Stop signs throughout the city in relation to certain variables: how they are treated in different boroughs, how their overall damage ratings compare to those of monolingual signs, and whether there is a discernible wear and tear difference when the signs are privately owned. This data is contained in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5. Aside from the charts, Arrêt/Stop signs have a mean damage rating of 2.296, with a median and mode of 2. Stop signs have a mean of 1.238, a median of 1, and a mode of 0, and surprisingly, Arrêt signs have a slightly higher mean TDR at 1.608, with a median and mode of 1. Taken together, monolingual signs have a mean of 1.449, which is still significantly lower than that of Arrêt/Stop signs ($p=2.29E-12$ in a Wilcoxon two sample test). In other words, Arrêt/Stop signs do show more wear and bear more damage than any signs out there, by a considerable amount. If nothing else, this suggests that new Arrêt/Stop signs are rare on the landscape. New signs, or signs that would probably receive a TDR of 0, are likely going to be monolingual. As Figure 4 points out, there are dozens of times more clean, tidy monolingual signs out there than bilingual signs, and a TDR rating of 0 for a Stop or Arrêt sign is still visibly different from a Arrêt/Stop sign with the same value (See Images 1 and 2).



Images 1 and 2: 2-57-245 and 24-6-2862. Both are 'new' stop signs, in the sense that they have a TDR or 0. The Arrêt still looks much nicer.
Images 3 and 4: 8-40-s116 and 20-43-749. Image 3 is a typical, down-trodden Arrêt/Stop Sign. Image 4 is the sign that received the highest total damage rating out of the 2816 signs studied.





Image 5 and 6: 23-11-302 and 21-13-522. Both signs received a TDR of 1, but the Arrêt/Stop looks much older.

Image 7 and 8: 17-24-2464 and 22-10-393. On the left, we see significant rusting and weathering; on the right, cracking of the paint.



Percentage of Stop, Arret, and Stop/Arret in Different Communities

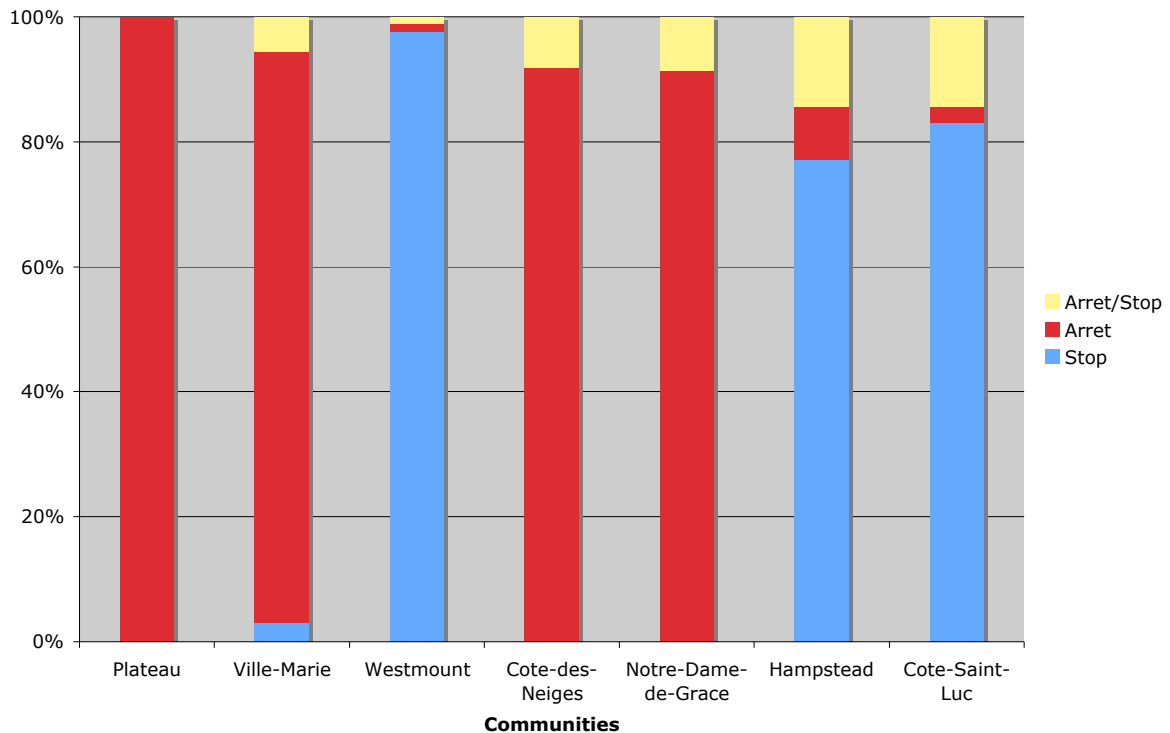


Figure 1: Proportions of each kind of sign within each municipality or borough.

Arrêt/Stop and Relative Dating

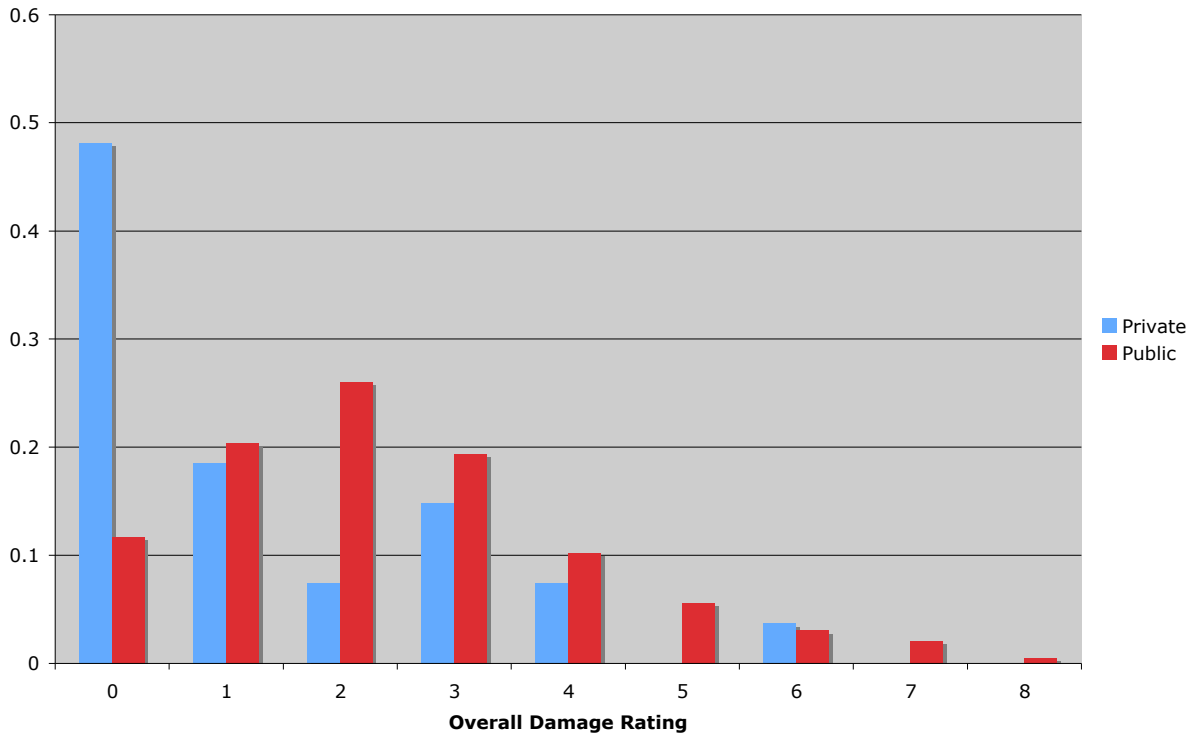
The second, more ambitious piece of information total damage ratings may provide is a possible chronological framework for the amount of time a stop sign has been outdoors. Not detailed, absolute dating, but a general, rough measure of the amount of time a sign has been installed based on TDR. For this, we must assume that damage, in whatever form, is accrued at an approximately constant rate. If so, then *generally speaking, the higher the TDR, the older the sign*. This, of course, has a number of caveats. For one, an already damaged sign may accrue additional damage faster than it would otherwise. A dented sign may be weakened structurally and crack; a vandalized sign may be partially scrubbed clean (see Image 4), only to leave significant wear; a sign with graffiti may tempt others to keep adding on. Beyond that, different “deterioration events” can have wildly different effects. Someone scraping their initials into a sign has a lot smaller of an impact on TDR than getting hit by a car does. Damage may also vary depending on the location of a sign. Stop signs on busy streets, near bus stations, or by schools are far more likely to be stickered or vandalized than those in quiet, upscale and older neighbourhoods. The biases of the surveyors also weigh heavy on total damage ratings, as they required subjective assessments of the amount of deterioration a sign had undergone. Image 4, for example, shows a sign that received a rating of 11 (2 Damage, 3 Wear, 3 Vandalism Front, 3 Vandalism Back), the highest value any sign received. Had I been the surveyor, however, I would likely have given the sign a TDR of 6 (2 Damage, 2 Wear, 1 Vandalism Front, 1 Vandalism Back). And finally, our field methods never really accounted for the notion of ‘weathering’. As Images 5 and 6 show, one sign can be visibly more yellowed and weathered than another, but they may still receive the same overall TDR (in this case, 1 each). Signs that show their age in ways that don’t fit into the total damage rating, then, challenge the notion that TDR can provide a straightforward guideline to the age of a sign.

All that said, however, it is clear that even if we do not fully understand the processes acting on the stop signs after their date of installation, the longer that a sign spends out on the street, the more likely it is to accrue wear, damage, and vandalism. In particular, some signs show wear that could only really be explained as a product of time spent outdoors, such as paint cracking or rust (see Images 7 and 8).

So what does this tell us? Well, with an average total damage rating of 2.296 compared to a damage rating of 1.449, we can make the assumption that Arrêt/Stop signs are not more beaten up because the Montreal populace has actively targeted them for destruction (this explanation would be unable to account for cracked, weathered, rusted, and yellowed signs), but simply because they're older. Taken as a whole, the Arrêt/Stop class of stop sign has probably been out on the streets for a longer period of time than most of the monolingual signs across the city. And when we consider, as was discussed above, that the newest signs (the ones with brighter luminescence patterns, more vivid shades of red, etc.) that we found out on the street are exclusively English or French (not English and French), it's likely that bilingual stop signs are no longer a part of each municipalities public works program. This becomes even more clear in Figure 2, which shows that the majority of Arrêt/Stop signs that received low damage ratings are not publicly controlled, but owned by businesses and private institutions.

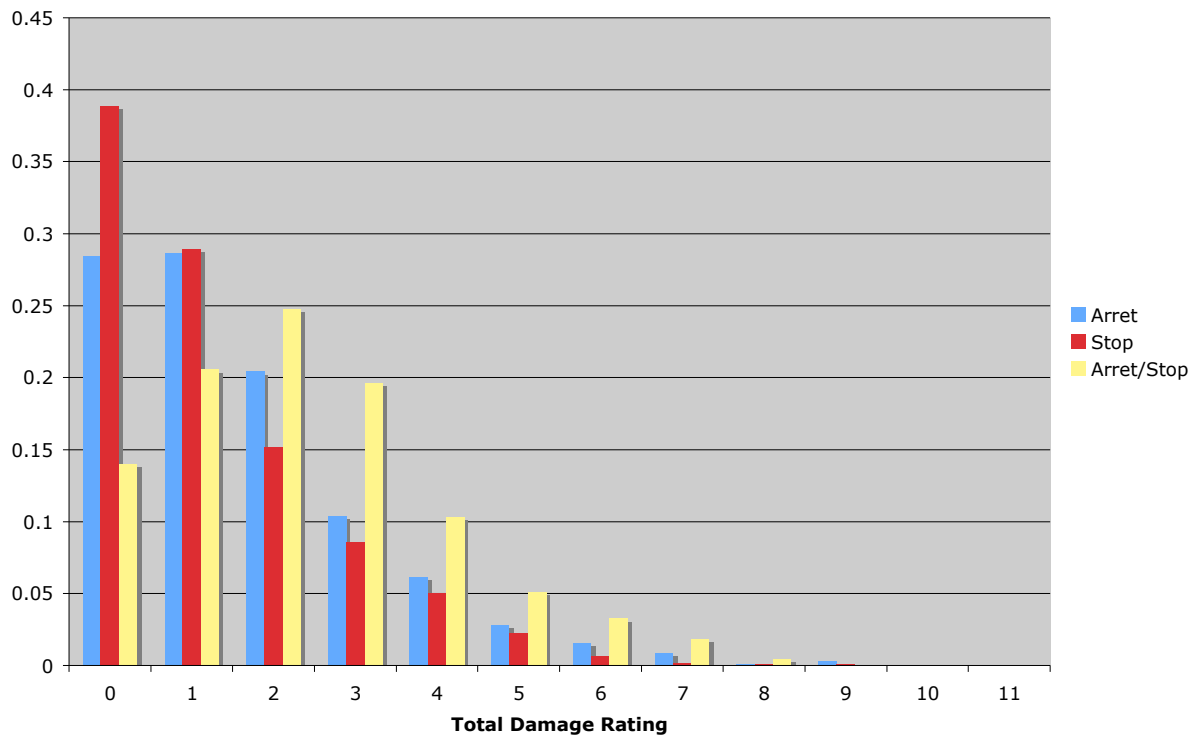
Figure 3 demonstrates how notable this trend is in our collected material. While both Arrêt and Stop signs follow a similar pattern of diminishing frequency as the level of damage increases (ie. the largest portion are found with a TDR of 0), the highest frequency of Arrêt/Stop signs is found with a TDR of 2. Looking away from frequencies within each stop sign category, Figure 4 reaffirms that, as was mentioned before, the newest signs with the lowest damage ratings are overwhelmingly monolingual, all across the city. As for a borough-by-borough analysis, Figure 5 shows that, for the most part, trends within each community are fairly similar, regardless of that communities' linguistic preference, with each trend-line peaking around 1 or 2 TDR and subsequently decreasing. The only exception is Ville-Marie, which contains only 17 Arrêt/Stop signs, 5 of which are all located at one intersection (Belmont and Est, two small streets in the middle of downtown) and have a TDR of 0. All five of these were on moveable cement stands, which may suggest that they were temporary (ie. installed during a public works project). It could be argued that, because they spend less time permanently outdoors, temporary signs would have lower damage ratings than other signs of equivalent age, thereby accounting for this cluster. However, even if they were permanent installations, Ville-Marie has a considerably smaller number of Arrêt/Stop signs within its boundaries, and smaller samples are always prone to some variance. As an aside, Ville-Marie and the Plateau were excluded from Figure 5 because their Arrêt/Stop counts were even smaller: 3 in Westmount, and 0 in the Plateau. Combined with the small sample from Ville-Marie, this may suggest that the more central communities (closer to downtown) are more concerned with keeping consistency in their signage. As Figure 1 shows, these three communities are the ones with the least diversity in sign language, either English or French.

Overall Damage Rating Frequency in Public and Private Arret/Stop Signs



**Figure 2: Public vs. Private Total Damage Ratings for Arrêt/Stop.
Figure 3: Total Damage Rating vs. Frequency within Stop Sign Types**

TDR Values vs. Frequency in Total Collected Data



Total Damage Rating vs. Number of Signs

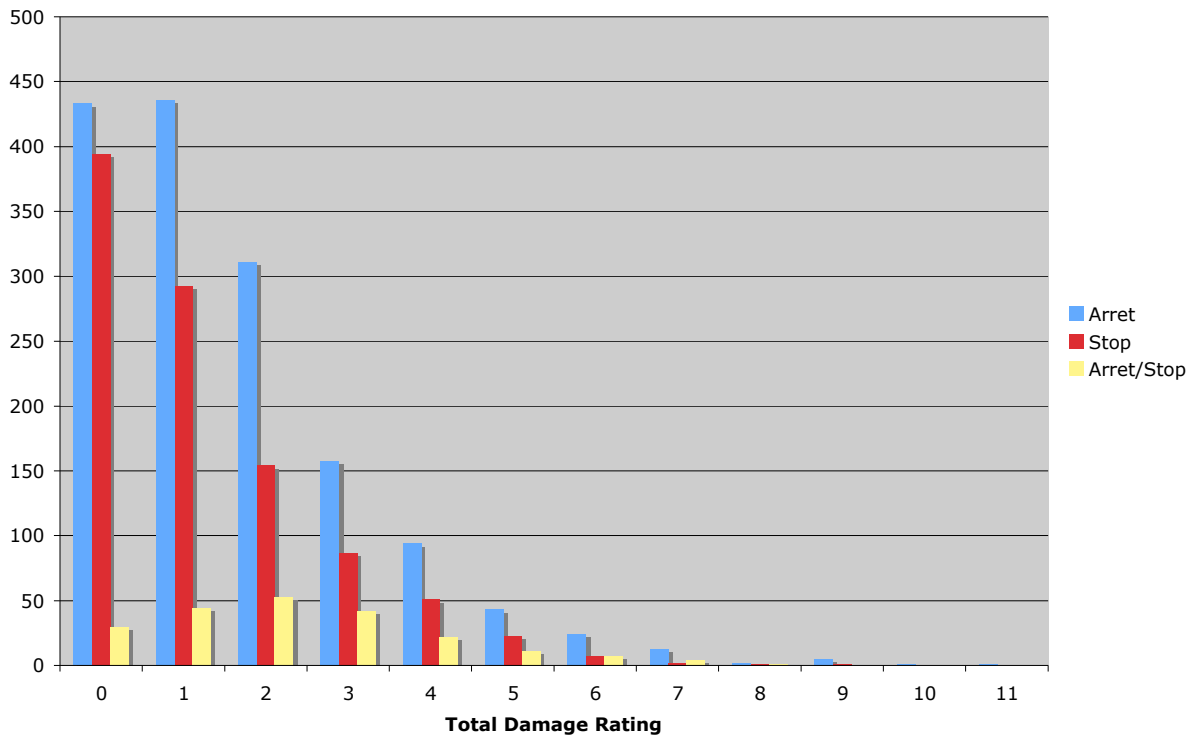
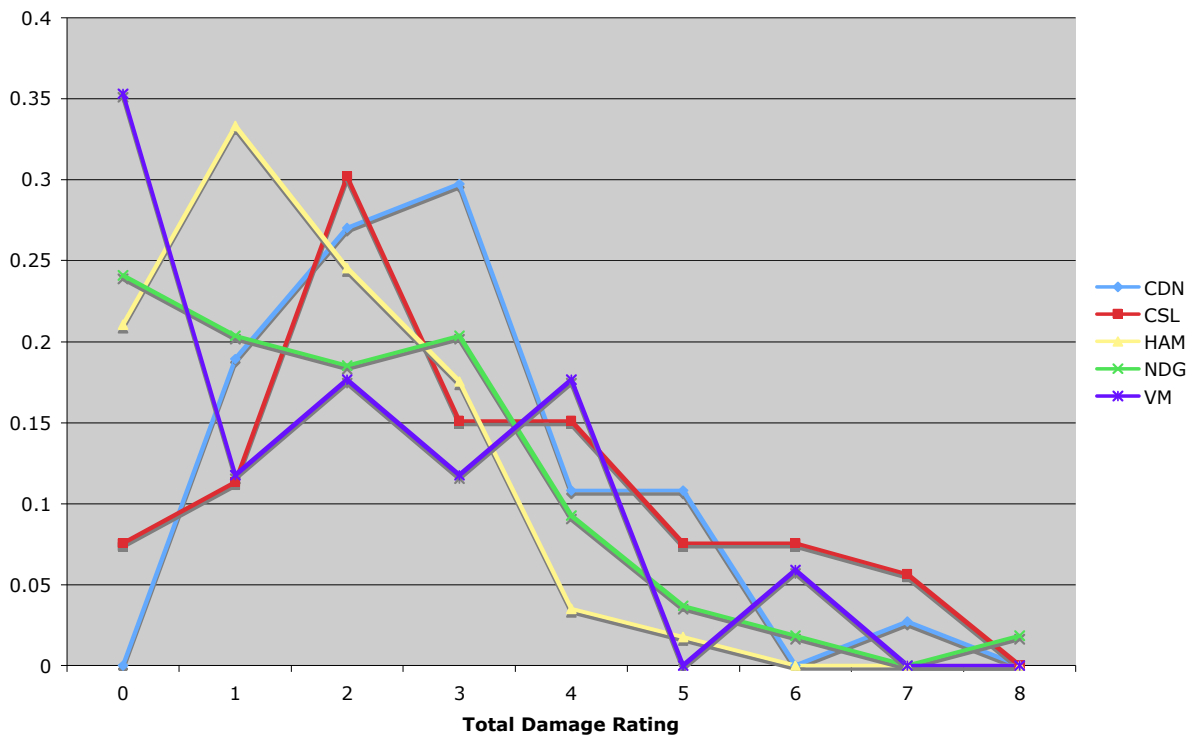


Figure 4: Total Damage Rating vs. Number of Signs in Each Language
Figure 5: Total Damage Rating for Arrêt/Stop in Each Community

Arret/Stop Signs and Total Damage within Each Borough



Results

Overall, the data collected during the “Stop: Toutes Directions” project point to a few conclusions about Arrêt/Stop signs. First, Arrêt/Stop signs are far more worn down and deteriorated than their monolingual counterparts. Second, they have a low distribution *across* the city, regardless of what borough or municipality is under examination. In fact, community boundaries seem to have little effect on either the quantity or quality of the Arrêt/Stop signs, regardless of linguistic preference, wealth, or location within the city. If anything, shabby, downtrodden bilingual signs in low frequencies appear to be a citywide phenomenon, except in the Plateau.

Third, based on the assumption that TDR can very roughly approximate the age of a sign or group of signs, we can conclude that *overall*, the ‘Arrêt/Stop’ class of stop signs is older than either of the monolingual types. This is not to say that Arrêt/Stop came first, but that the signs that are still in use in public areas are in general older and have been installed longer than some, if not many, of the Arrêt or Stop signs around them. Going further, while we have found a number of ‘new’ monolingual signs (an assessment that is unfortunately based not on concrete dating, but on subjective assessment), we have not found a significant amount of ‘new’ Arrêt/Stop signs. This suggests not only that Arrêt/Stop signs are relatively old, but also that new Arrêt/Stop signs are not entering the system. Many of the communities surveyed have existed for a long time, and therefore have probably had publicly installed signage for a long time as well. As a result, new stop signs (with a TDR of 0) can only enter the system through the replacement of old, decrepit, out-dated ones (with higher TDRs). We have seen that, based on total damage ratings, there are a huge number more ‘new’ monolingual signs in the system than bilingual ones.

It is highly unlikely that, when the Arrêt/Stop signs were originally installed in their current positions, they were installed in the small quantities and sparse distribution in which they exist today. While municipal bureaucracy in Montreal is famous for its esoteric policies, there is little chance that, at some unknown point in the past, each community set out to install small numbers of bilingual signs in ostensibly unrelated locations, and has zealously guarded them to this day. Instead, it is much more probable that Arrêt/Stop signs once existed in a higher proportion than they do today, and are slowly being phased out in favour of monolingual signs. Communities probably never saw the need to expend resources for a full-scale removal of all the bilingual signs within their boundaries, but have replaced them on a piece-meal basis, once they have reached a level of weathering and damage that makes them more or less unusable. They are either not made anymore or not widely purchased, and so in all probability they will, over the next couple decades, be phased out of public existence entirely. In terms of private property, however, it remains to be seen what will happen. Many of the Arrêt/Stop signs that are not the jurisdiction of municipal public works departments are in much better condition than their public counterparts, and each business or institution may have their own opinions on sign language that aren’t as easy to discern as those of different communities.

Conclusions: What do Arrêt/Stop Signs Say about Montreal?

There are two separate inferences that can be drawn from the analysis done in this paper. One is that the declining number of bilingual stop signs across the city, and their eventual expected extinction, reflects a hardening of the connection between language and identity within the city. As questions and concerns over French national identity and culture became codified and into provincial law, language started to matter more than it once did to the Montreal population. Reflecting the shift away from accommodation and a linguistic “laissez-faire” approach, predominantly French communities started to replace Arrêt/Stop signs with Arrêt. English communities, however, reacted to the regulation of language (and the threat it posed to their linguistic and cultural identity) by moving in the other direction, towards mainly English signage. As a result, individual communities are highly rigid in their public language use, opting to use and standardize monolingual signage within their borders. This comes at the cost of Arrêt/Stop signs. In a sense, then, bilingual stop signs are representative of the disappearance of a much larger feeling within Montreal of linguistic tolerance, replaced with a starker division between English and French communities. While the analogy is far from perfect, I am reminded of the post-invasion

realignment of Baghdad neighbourhoods into Sunni-dominated and Shia-dominated areas. While Sunni and Shia tensions and conflicts have existed for centuries, these identities were far less relevant to the demographic distribution of Baghdad than they are now, and Sunni-Shia violence was considerably lower as well, largely because Saddam Hussein's regime was harshly secular. Like in Iraq (albeit to a far less extreme level), a deep cultural divide emerged in Montreal where there was none before, and has had serious demographic and political consequences. The decline of Arrêt/Stop signs in the face of monolingual signage is just one small example of how this process has shaped the Montreal landscape.

The second conclusion that could be reached on Arrêt/Stop is a lot less sensational, but may be a little closer to the truth. As has been noted above, the language that appears on a stop sign is largely irrelevant, because the symbol of a red octagon has a universally recognized meaning. Shape and colour, then, matter far more than the linguistic elements of a sign. Therefore, it matters little what is said on a sign, or what language it's in, to ensure compliance. If sign-makers and sign-installers are placing functionality ahead of linguistic considerations in designing and purchasing stop signs, they may conclude that having two languages on a sign is essentially irrelevant. The decision on language, then, may depend less on communal identity than an assessment by each community's public works officials as to what language might ensure the highest levels of compliance. Arrêt/Stop signs aren't disappearing because of a dramatic shift in French-English relations within Montreal, but simply because there are more efficient designs out there.

Unfortunately, the data collected for the *Stop: Toutes Directions* project cannot be applied in any conclusive way to determine which perspective is closest to the truth. There is certainly a great deal of language regulation in Montreal, something that Anglophones have never been too happy about, and as an Anglophone in Montreal I have encountered individuals who refuse to speak English to me. However, there has always been tension between the English and French, often at much higher levels than today, and the polarization of stop signs between communities may not accurately reflect the opinions of most Montrealers. The lower damage rating present in Arrêt/Stop signs on private property, for example, may point to more tolerant sentiments within the community than within its government. The answer to this problem of placing the steady decline of Arrêt/Stop signs in its proper cultural context requires additional data that a purely material analysis cannot provide. In other words, the physical phenomenon has been identified, but its ideological and cultural causes have not. Until further research can be done on the nature of language in Montreal and how it is perceived by its residents, we can only speculate on the significance of the disappearance of Arrêt/Stop signs, or even whether it's significant at all.