PROJECT SUMMARY

*Modeling Change: The Paths of French*
France Martineau: Director

Language plays a major role in the construction of identity because it is anchored in all levels of society. French, one of Canada's two official languages, is also spoken in several European, Asian, African and Caribbean countries. The concept of French being the language of the motherland, France, and being diffused from there to the foreign countries that use it is no longer valid. French must be perceived as a language that belongs to all of its speakers and that provides development standards for the promotion of its identity through the diversity of its different forms. This evolution of French must equally lead to an in-depth revision of the definition of its identity. From the 13th century, when the superiority of the language of Paris began to be affirmed, until the Revolution, when French imposed itself as the cornerstone of the nation, French was a language concerned with the uniqueness of its norm. This perspective hides an important reality, however: the French language has always had diverse forms. Our Major Research Project encompasses a vast exploration of the varieties of French beginning with the implantation period of French in Canada (17th-18th centuries) and going back to the roots of French in the Middle Ages (9th century).

Our study of French is essential to the construction of a renewed theoretical model of linguistic change. Until now, the history of French for the period we studied is built upon two main sources: language discourse (grammars, treaties on French, and other texts of an ideological nature) and literary texts (from the *Chanson de Roland* to Racine or Corneille). Without disregarding these corpora, we intend to address fundamental questions about change by building a corpus representative of a pluralistic society. We will then add non-traditional corpora representing different spheres of social life: judicial archives, notarial records, treaties, and travel journals. A computer model based on advanced technology and methodology has been successfully applied by teams of researchers working on medieval English and Portuguese. This is the same technology that will allow us to manage the complexity of the language and the articulation of the internal and external conditions of change: research for balance in the context of different competing grammatical systems, sustained dialectal exchanges with other languages and external pressure from some populations' assertions of identity. The quantitative and formal model specific to French that we will develop will create a unique synergy because it will be integrated into current research on other languages (English and Portuguese). We will be able to measure, for different stages as well as for different languages, the variable configurations of change.

Our team, composed of researchers from three disciplines in the humanities (linguistics, literature, history) and from computer science and mathematics, has members in nine countries (Canada, United States, France, Denmark, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and Portugal) and results from a decade of
partnerships and collaborations. We have also established partnerships with major archive centres and renowned research organizations (the ARTFL Project, the BALSAC Project/Laboratory of Geographical History, the Centre ATO, CRÉFO, the Strathy Language Unit, TAPoR, Library and Archives Canada, Archives nationales du Québec in Quebec City, Archives nationales du Québec in Montreal, the Division des archives of the University of Montreal, the Centre d’études acadiennes at the University of Moncton, the Archives départementales de Charente-Maritimes), as well as with Champion Press.

Applying our model to French will allow us to answer fundamental questions about linguistic change and about the societies at the source of this change. What are these linguistic and social triggers of change, and how does change propagate? What are the effects of language or dialect contact on the evolution of a language? And how do societies manage language contact? How does one define the demographic weight of certain linguistic and social groups in the process of change? How does one define a standard and a linguistic identity?

Linguistic diversity is intertwined with the history of Canada (aboriginal languages, bilingualism of its settlers, contact between English and French, multiculturalism). Already privileged by this historical perspective and by Canadian expertise on linguistic change, Canada will consolidate its leadership role in fundamental research on French among francophone countries. This Major Research Initiative will have important ramifications not only within the university community, but also outside of it. With a better understanding of its linguistic heritage, its diversity and standards, the Canadian community can better position itself in the French-speaking world and propose new paths for the French language.