

Policy Horizons Canada – The Future of Languages in Canada

Caroline Poole, Class of 2022

With my Golz Fellowship this summer, I completed a foresight internship at Policy Horizons Canada, a Canadian Government organization which specializes in strategic foresight. This organization serves the federal government and its agencies across Canada to generate knowledge about the major policy points and anticipated economic, social, political, and scientific concerns of the next ten to fifteen years. Horizons adopts the foresight method to explore a range of plausible, alternative futures and identify the challenges and opportunities that may emerge.

My primary role as intern was to carry out an independent foresight study on a topic of my choosing. My project on the Future of Languages in Canada involved dynamic research on a variety of potential sources of change and disruption on Canada's linguistic composition and the intersections of language, technology, identity, and community building. I carried out my eight-week project by accelerating a typical foresight timeline; the first stages involved defining the scope of my study, summarizing key linguistic assumptions held by Canadian policymakers, and scanning a variety of sources, websites, and networks for potential weak signals of disruption. Using these insights, I created a system map outlining key relationships and forces in Canada's language system including different linguistic hierarchies and technological transformations. Throughout these early stages, I met with many of my colleagues to gather their insights and feedback on my project. I then distilled five primary change drivers based on my understanding of Canada's languages to outline where transformative changes are unfolding. At this stage, I moderated both a Scan Club meeting and a cross-impacting exercise on my change drivers to distill further potential linguistic consequences. To conclude my study, I produced a report which outlined my research and offered potential challenges and opportunities for Canadian policymakers to consider when designing resilient language and communication-based policies.

My choice of subject was informed in part by my Honors research: questions of language and linguistic sovereignty are crucial in the context of the Quebecois sovereignty movement in the 1960s and 1970s. By studying language through strategic foresight, I have gained new insights into what dynamics shape linguistic identities and how Canadians construct identities and communities, and make sense of their realities. I hope to bring these new insights to my work this fall.

In addition to my own independent research, I participated in a variety of projects and initiatives throughout the organization. For example, I took part in a number of weekly Scan Club meetings to gather insights on weak signals of disruption. These signals covered a wide variety of topics including artificial intelligence, fitness drones, deep fakes, smart home design and sensemaking. I also completed cascade diagram exercises led by the OECD over Zoom, tested vulnerable sensemaking assumptions with the Social Futures team, and networked with many of my colleagues across Policy Horizons.

This experience was invaluable by connecting me with accomplished policymakers and foresight analysts in Canada with a range of expertise. Many of my colleagues provided me with ideas and

advice for my own career path in the Canadian public service, something which I hope to pursue after graduating from Bowdoin. Furthermore, this experience proved that my research and writing skills as a history student are widely applicable, even in a future-oriented context.

Graphs/Figures/Mindmaps

Faculty Mentor: Professor M. Roberts

Funded by the History Department Golz Fellowship

References

Chris Hagerman, PhD
Senior Foresight Analyst
Policy Horizons Canada
(343) 553-5171.