

Outside the Octagon **A Study of Damaged Montreal Stop Signs**

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Abstract: Focusing on highly damaged signs, I explore the characteristics of each sign identified as code 3: high, examine vandalism and wear as indicators of human and non-human-induced damage, and ask how language relates to damaged stop signs in Montreal. 83 out of 2816 signs are identified as highly damaged. Both Francophones and Anglophones cause damage to stop signs.

Introduction

Artifacts speak through their context and environment. Since no stop sign included in this study records its history from the time it was installed to the time of this research project, most of our work only makes guesses at what happened to various stop signs around Montreal. Imperfect in its conclusions, general knowledge about what goes on in Montreal in 2008 is achieved from the *Stop: Toutes Directions* Project. Signs specifically studied in this project are the 83 signs categorized as damage code 3: high, very significantly bent, or three or more distinct visible dents. Some signs are elaborate works of art that add to the richness of the city's bilingual character and highlight Montreal's support for graffiti artists and its citizens' artistic endeavours.

Public forms of expression such as vandalism show direct damage by humans. 33 high-damage signs are also identified as vandalized: high – seven signs, mid – six signs, low – 20 signs. Damage could be accidental or intentional. It could result from someone hitting the sign with a car, tool, or other machine, for various reasons. It is difficult to know exactly what happened, but since the signs are in highly populated areas, humans are likely the cause of most stop sign damage.

Direct human forces are not the only possible cause of stop sign damage, though. Weathering and age are also potential causes of stop sign damage. Signs damaged by weather or age are also likely to also be classified as worn for fading or weathering effects around bolts (rust, stains). The most common weathering seen on signs is stains starting around rusty bolts creating a line down the sign. 44 of the high-damage signs are identified as worn: high – five signs, mid – six signs, low – 33 signs. Human activity is also present in worn signs – attempts at removing vandalism, fingerprints, and car exhaust on signs contribute to fading. A few signs are neither worn nor vandalized.

Human and non-human forces combine to damage stop signs in Montreal. Whereas we can never know exactly what caused the damage, certain sign characteristics hint at what may have caused the damage. What are these characteristics? This is what I will try to answer in this project. Whereas humans are the only ones vandalizing signs, weather and age, as well as human activity such as car exhaust contribute to sign wear. Determining the cause of sign damage is imperfect without witness accounts of what happened. Only the sign's remains give a clue as to what happened to damage the sign.

Damage to archaeological sites and artifacts is not uncommon. There are stories of dredging (Balter) damaging a prehistoric Israeli archaeological site, and consequences of war in Iraq destroying the archaeological city of Babylon (*New York Times*, January 16, 2005).

Methods

Stop: Toutes Directions began in late March 2008 as I, Sarah Bedard and Karla Heath ventured into Zone 4 – the area surrounding the McGill campus and student ghetto, to survey stop signs. We followed a map printed from Google and took a photo and notes on each stop sign we passed. The notes included intersection name, location of the sign in the intersection, sign's language, luminescence, codes for damage, wear, vandalism, number of supports, and all-way status. Following Zone 4, Sarah, Karla and I surveyed Zone 1 – Montreal Plateau area, and Zone 24 – Cote Ste. Luc. I completed a final zone on April 3 – Zone 32 in west Montreal around Concordia's Loyola campus.

Overall, I completed surveying 4 zones and 302 signs. Rainy weather during the survey of Zone 24 did not stop us from collecting data. The use of a plastic bag found at Cavendish Mall helped keep our worksheets dry and we were able to complete the zone in one afternoon. The only "Stop Toutes Directions" sign in the class collection was found in Zone 24 – Cote Ste. Luc.

Handwritten data was entered into a class master data sheet on Microsoft Excel and digital photos added to the class collection of 2816 signs. This photo data is available on CD.

For my project, I separated all code 3: highly damaged signs from the rest. I took a look at each photo of the highly damaged signs and wrote a description of each (Appendix A). Then, aspects of vandalism and wear were identified to draw conclusions on why the signs were damaged and what forces caused their damage. Language and municipality data helped to further analyze the damaged signs.

Results

Language	# of signs
Arrêt	45
Stop	33
Arrêt/Stop	3
No Words	2

Figure 1: Language per highly damaged sign.

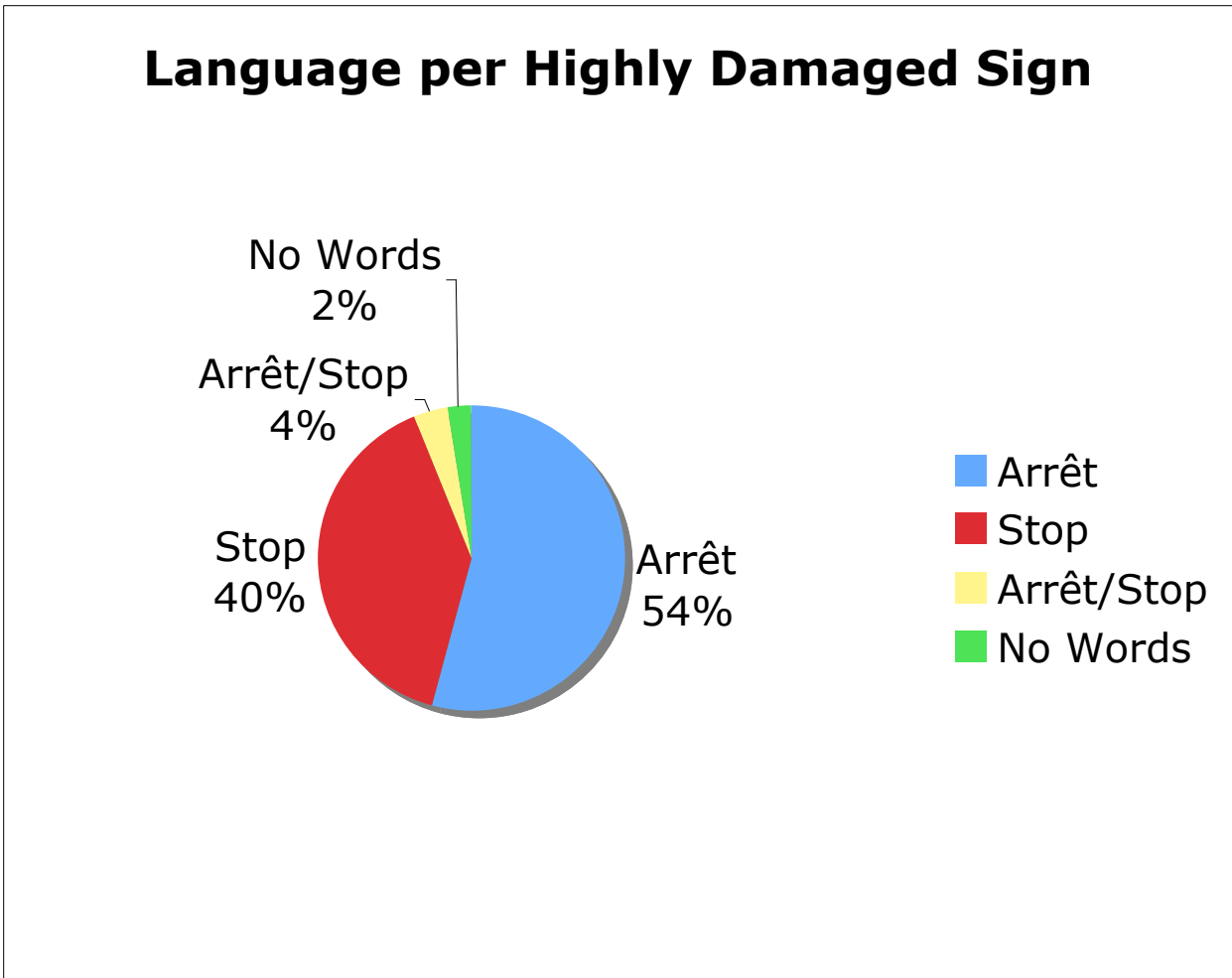


Figure 2: Pie chart highlighting distribution of language on highly damaged signs.

Other Criteria	Specimen	Municipality	Description
Vandalism 3: High			
Front	3--24--7	Ville Marie	8+ stickers, paint, letters still visible.
	3--52--7	Ville Marie	Large red "A" on lower left face.
	9--6--d	CDN	Handwriting over letterhead.
	9--6--e	CDN	"IMB", designs, red paint on support
	9--8--f	CDN	"IMB", "07"
Back	15--10--7	West	Faint black letters around "STOP".
	3--24--7	Ville Marie	Yellow space ship, 6 other stickers. B&W
	3--52--7	Ville Marie	Two hand-written sickers
	7--18--2	Ville Marie	Writing: "Everyone picks their nose."
Vandalism 2: Mid			
Front	2--23--8	Plateau	Writing on lower right. Most damaged.
	3--40--1	Ville Marie	2 stickers.
	9--9--f	CDN	White paint and "IMB".
	12--20--7	West	Writing in white paint, one sticker.
	13--26--5	West	Black handwriting.

Back	3--40--1 12--14--8	Plateau West	3 stickers. White paint writing on lower corner.
Vandalism 1: Low			
Front	3--14--8	Ville Marie	1 sticker.
	3--35--3	Ville Marie	1 sticker on 2-way arret sign.
	8--3--2	West	1 sticker.
	8--30--3	West	Piece of string on lower part.
	8--55--5	West	Tan writing.
	9--6--b	CDN	Paint or car exhaust?
	12--13--3	West	1 sticker.
	12--19--7	West	White writing.
	12--28--5	West	1 sticker.
	14--28--4	CDN	1 sticker.
	15--12--7	CDN	Many scratches.
	23--15--7	NDG	"F", "T".
	28--26--4	NDG	1 sticker.
	29--46--7	CSL	1 sticker.
Back	1--43--4	Plateau	1 sticker.
	7--27--1	Ville Marie	1 sticker.
	8--30--3	West	No photo
	12--12--7	West	No photo
	12--20--7	West	Handwriting.
	12--24--7	West	1 removed sticker.
	17--15--7	CDN	Writing.
	20--9--4	NDG	2 stickers. Intentional damage.
	23--15--7	NDG	1 sticker.

Figure 3: Specimen, municipality, and description of each of 33 *vandalised* signs out of 83 highly damaged signs. May indicate humans damaging signs.

Other Criteria	Specimen	Municipality	Description
Wear 3: High			
Front	3--35--3	Ville Marie	Weather wear from bolts, down.
	9--8--b	CDN	Only ~10% of sign left on support.
	11--25--3	West	Scratched continuously all over.
	15--12--7	CDN	Many scratches.
	31--23--3	NDG	Faded colour all over.
Wear 2: Mid			
Front	8--55--5	West	Weather wear from top bolt.
	11--25--5	West	Weather wear from top bolt.
	12--21--5	West	Diamond shape wear outline.
	15--10--7	West	General wear.
	16--35--3	NDG	Weathered, tilted over.
	31--12.5--7.5		Weather wear around bolts.
Wear 1: Low			
Front	1--43--4	Plateau	Weather wear around bolts.
	3--24--7	Ville Marie	Weather wear around bolts.
	4--4--3	Ville Marie	Slightly faded.
	7--16--1	Ville Marie	Weather wear around bolts.
	7--17--a	Ville Marie	Faded.

7--18--2	Ville Marie	Faded.
7--27--1	Ville Marie	Faded.
7--29--1	Ville Marie	Weather wear around bolts.
9--6--b	CDN	Car exhaust caused most wear?
9--6--e	CDN	Car exhaust - in a parking garage...
9--7--c	CDN	Same parking garage. Not weathering wear.
9--8--f	CDN	More likely pollution than wear from weather.
9--9--f	CDN	Fading around graffiti. Attempt to remove it?
9--39--1	CDN	Weathered.
11--1--5	West	Grey paint dripping down face.
11--13--1	West	Weather wear around bolts.
11--14--5	West	Weather wear around bolts.
11--17--1	West	Weather wear around bolts.
11--17--5	West	Faded.
11--28--3	West	Weathered.
12--13--3	West	Weathered.
12--14--7	West	Weathered.
12--16--5	West	Faded and worn with weather.
12--24--7	West	<i>Fingerprints.</i>
15--8--7	West	Long grey paint drip.
15--21--5	West	Faded.
17--6.5--3	CSL	Weather wear around bolts.
17--5--7	CSL	Weather wear around bolts.
17--53--5	Ham	Weather wear around bolts.
27-10--1.5	NDG	Looks like tire marks on face.
29--46--7	CSL	Faded.
31--10--6	NDG	Weather wear around bolts.
31--16--5.5	NDG	Fading on lower half, sign facing ground.

Figure 4: Specimen, municipality, and description of 44 worn signs out of sample of 83 highly damaged signs. Weather and human causes.



Figure 5: Sign 9-6-e. Example of high vandalism (intentional) and low wear (likely from car exhaust).



Figure 6: Sign 2-23-8. One of most highly damaged signs.



Figure 7: Sign 23-15-7. One of the most highly damaged signs.

Discussion

Clear evidence of human-induced damage is found in the Cote des Neiges garage with highly vandalised signs. These signs are worn likely by car exhaust and are not exposed to weathering like outdoor signs. Sign 9-8-b (~10% of the sign remains) is found in the garage and is likely to be so extensively damaged because of human activity. The clean-cut edges indicate intentional damage. The entire sign was not removed, however. Since part of the sign remains, it still seems to be required there. This sign should be replaced as soon as possible.

Outside of garages, signs are much more exposed to damage from accidents and from weather. Several signs are facing the ground – their support pole often at the same angle facing the ground. Environmental factors are the cause and often signs are found in mounds of snow in the winter. Snow or snow removal likely causes the damage to many of these signs.

Less than half of the highly damaged signs are also vandalised. While it is a good indicator of the damage being caused by humans, vandalism does not indicate how or why the vandalism occurred. More Arrêt than Stop signs are damaged – no indication that humans damaging signs are against the use of English signs in Montreal (a French speaking city). Even more French signs are damaged than English signs. 54% of highly damaged signs are in French versus 40% for English signs. The rest are Arrêt/Stop or have no words at all.

Only three of the 83 (3.6%) highly damaged signs are Arrêt/Stop. Arrêt/Stop signs are also less common in the overall sample from Montreal (220/2816 signs, 7.8%). These signs are found at the McGill campus, in Westmount, and in Hamstead. It is hard to say that damage corresponds with language when looking at this sample as it is representative of the entire data collection. There is no drastic difference between the damage on Stop, Arrêt, or Arrêt/Stop signs. The language of signs represents major linguistic groups in the area around the signs. If damage is caused by humans, then from the data in this sample, they do so indiscriminately. Both Francophones and Anglophones cause damage to stop signs.

Future research may question damage and language use on license plates.

References

Balter, Michael. 2000. Dredging at Israeli Site Prompts Mudslinging. *Science* 287:5451.

Appendix A: Descriptions of Damaged Signs

Specimen	Photo	Description of Damage (language noted)
1-43-4	1433	Arrêt. Lower half of sign pulled forward from under the back support. Two dents on rights side under the "A".
2-23-8	134	Arrêt. Entire left side of sign completely folded over. "E" and "T" invisible. Back of sign visible.
2-27-7	145	Arrêt. Right side pushed back. Crack between two "R"s.
3-14-8	260	Arrêt. Left side pulled forward but all letters still visible.
3-16-3	265	Arrêt. Lower half of sign pulled forward, worse on right side near "A" and first "R".
3-24-7	461	Arrêt. Heavily vandalized sign.
3-35-3	712	Arrêt. Two scratches from upper left face to lower right.
3-40-1	729	Arrêt. Half of the first "R" is scratched out.
3-49-3	Missing	
3-52-7	758	Arrêt. Heavily vandalized.
4-2-8	1172	Arrêt. Top and lower left side and curled back. "T" still visible. Scratch on right side and near top of "A".
4-4-3	1178	Arrêt/Stop. Pulled forward from support. "ARRE" and "STO" more forward than "T" and "P".
7-14-6	28	Arrêt. Lower left of sign is pulled forward.
7-16-1	34	Arrêt. Both sides pushed back surrounding the telephone pole.
7-17-a	35	Arrêt. Left side of sign pushed back. Scratch on lower left.
7-18-2	38	Arrêt. Lower half of sign pulled forward. Scratch on mid-left.
7-27-1	270	Arrêt. Right side "AR" pushed back. Deep scratches on right. Large dents around bolts.
7-29-1	278	Arrêt. Both sides pulled in, bending sign inward around middle "R".
7-31-7	281	Arrêt. Both sides pushed back, warped around pole.
8-3-2	V005	Stop. Large dent in lower left, scratches, lower part of "S" scratched out. Dent between "T" and "O".
8-4-4	V007	Stop. Top left pulled in above "P".
8-4-4	V009	Stop. Both sides pulled in toward the middle. Piece missing on mid-left side. Scratches.
8-15-7	S23	No words. Left half of sign missing. Grey frame for sign
8-30-3	S72	No words. Right half of sign missing. Grey frame instead.
8-55-5	S183	Stop. Large dents and missing pieces on right side. Upper right pushed back.
9-6-b	472	Arrêt. Scratched around edges. Pulled into middle from both sides.
9-6-d	474	Arrêt. Scratches around edges. Right side pulled forward.
9-6-e	475	Arrêt. Left side pulled forward. Heavy vandalism. "S" scratched between "A" and first "R".
9-7-c	482	Arrêt. Left side pulled forward off garage wall.
9-8-b	484	Arrêt. Only right side of "T" visible. Only about 15% of sign sill attached to support.
9-8-f	487	Arrêt. Sign warped in many directions. Right side pushed back, top left corner pulled off wall.
9-9-f	495	Arrêt. Right side pulled off wall. Scratch down length of sign between first "R" and second "R".
9-15-1	515	Arrêt. Right side of sign pushed back.
9-39-1	586	Arrêt. Large dents around bolts.
11-1-5	48	Stop. Both sides pulled in to center. Lower right side pulled in most dramatically with large scratches on face.
11-13-1	84	Stop. Upper left and lower right pushed back. Large scratch down middle of sign between "T" and "O".

11-14-5	85	Stop. Right face heavily scratched, dented, and pushed back.
11-17-1	93	Stop. Right side scratched and pushed back. "OP" side fine.
11-17-5	95	Stop. Upper left pushed back.
11-25-3	122	Arrêt/Stop. Heavily scratched across entire face. Lower left pushed back.
11-25-5	123	Stop. Left side missing pieces, heavily scratched, pushed back from center.
11-28-3	133	Stop. Left side heavily scratched and bent in.
12-13-3	1492	Stop. Lower left bent back with large scratch, red colour missing.
12-14-7	1494	Stop. Hinged sign missing lower hinge.
12-16-5	1504	Stop. Right part pushed back, bent, scratched.
12-19-7	1514	Stop. Large dent from upper right to lower left below letters.
12-20-7	1515	Stop. Dent from upper left to lower right below letters.
12-21-5	1519	Stop. Looks like sign is wrapped around a diamond-shaped sign behind it. Extremities pushed back, scratches in diamond shape.
12-24-7	1529	Stop. Upper left, lower right pulled in. Letters unaffected.
12-58-5	1540	Stop. Extreme damage on lower right face. Bent back, large scratch, back support exposed.
12-36-3	1556	Stop. Upper right pushed farther back than earlier damaged signs.
12-45-1	1579	Stop. Upper left bent back with dent about "P".
13-26-5	432	Stop. Both sides pulled toward the center
14-28-4	3363	Arrêt. Lower left pushed back, many scratches on face.
15-8-7	173	Stop. Lower left pulled forward, long scratch along bend.
15-10-7	177	Stop. Both sides pulled toward center. Sharp angle along middle line between "T" and "O".
15-12-7	185	Arrêt. Left side pulled forward, many scratches all over face.
15-21-5	207	Stop. Upper right pushed back, two layers of bends. Scratched.
16-35-3	163	Arrêt. Sign facing ground. Lower right pushed back and scratched.
17-6.5-3	6218	Stop. Right side pushed back.
17-15-7	6259	Arrêt. Lower right pushed back.
17-16-4	6264	Arrêt. Entire left side pulled off telephone pole, facing beyond "A".
17-16-5	6265	Arrêt. Entire right side pulled off telephone pole, facing beyond "T".
17-40-3	2503	Stop. Both sides pushed back with scratch along center line.
17-52-5	2539	Stop. Warped sign. Right side pulled forward.
17-53-5	2543	Arrêt/Stop. Upper part of sign pushed back.
19-15-8	239	Arrêt. Left side pushed back.
20-9-4	593	Arrêt. Looks like it has been hit from the back, many dents jutting forward through sign. Scratches on the left face.
20-16-8	697	Arrêt. Top and lower sides pulled along support on the back over letters.
23-15-7	318	Arrêt. Lower right extremely scratched and pulled forward.
24-1-8	2852	Arrêt. Bent in and out all over.
24-2-7	2854	Arrêt. Pieces missing from top and lower bolt area. Bent in along middle "R".
25-24-7	59	Stop. Almost at 45 degree angle facing toward ground. Falling over.
27-10-1.5	432	Arrêt. Left side pushed back. Dent on lower part.
27-18-7	456	Arrêt. Right side pulled forward.
28-26-4	164	Arrêt. Lower half pulled forward and bent unevenly.
29-46-7	166	Stop. Right side pushed back.
31-10-6	324	Arrêt. Lower left pushed back and scratched on face.
31-12.5-7.5	336	Arrêt. Both sides pushed back stopping at sign behind it.
31-16-5.5	356	Arrêt. Facing the ground sharply (45 degree angle). Lower half seems to be pulled up.
31-23-3	377	Arrêt. Left side pushed back with scratch/crack along middle "R".