

Translating for Parliament

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This article gives a brief account of parliamentary translation in Canada, from its early beginnings to the present. It describes the present structure of the parliamentary translation service and provides some statistics so as to give an idea of the problems that must be overcome in the process of upholding the *Official Languages Act* in a bilingual Canada. Lastly, it will touch on the special aspects of what is known as "parliamentary" translation, and the features that make this such an interesting field in which to work.

Translation in the national legislature dates from the early years of Confederation, more specifically 1872-73 when parliamentary debates were translated by freelancers. This explains why earlier texts are unilingual. They sit on the shelf awaiting some eager translator willing to bring to life such famous Canadians as Sir John A. Macdonald or the Fathers of Confederation.

Not until the turn of the century did the seven debate translators join the ranks of the public service. While they were public servants in name, their department and attire were that of aristocrats. Attired in top hats with walking stick in hand, they viewed the translation process more as an honour and a form of relaxation than a daily grind. In the meantime, federal departments and agencies, which were not subject to the same requirements as Parliament, provided very little in the way of translation. In 1913, there were only seven or eight translators scattered throughout the various departments.

Following a stormy debate in 1934, Parliament created the Translation Bureau, placing it under the authority of the Secretary of State Department. The Bureau grouped together under the direction of its first superintendant, Mr. Domitien Robichaud, 91 translators, (including 12 working for Parliament). Translators with the Department of External Affairs and the Senate did not join the Bureau until 1946 and 1950 respectively.

With the creation of the Bureau, more stringent hiring practices were established. Responsibility for recruiting all translators was assigned to the Public Service Commission. It was no longer enough to be merely "bilingual" in order to become a translator.

During the Second World War and the ensuing years, the Bureau experienced its initial period of real growth. In 1948, the Bureau employed 175 translators. This figure increased gradually to 300 to meet the ever-growing needs of the federal administration. This growth did not mean, however, that the Bureau relaxed

its hiring standards. In 1947, for example, only 15 applicants out of a total of 325 passed the Bureau's entrance examination.

New requirements and the astounding increase in the demand for translation services following the adoption of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969 led the Bureau to increase its staff and step up its recruitment efforts. It even turned to hiring translators from Europe since Canadian universities were not producing graduates in translation. The recruitment campaign peaked in 1974 with the hiring of a total of 400 new translators.

The bureau has continued to increase its staff, which now stands at approximately 1,100 translators. In order to maintain and improve the quality of its services two important decisions have been made in the past decade. Firstly, in order to facilitate the translator's task and to fulfill the mission assigned to it by cabinet in 1974, namely to standardize vocabulary, the Bureau set up in 1975 a terminology and documentation service which now employs more than 100 terminologists. Toward the end of the seventies, the Bureau launched an intensive training and development program for its translators.

Today, the Canadian government Translation Bureau is one of, if not the, most important organization of its kind in the world, both in terms of the volume of words translated and in terms of cultural impact.

Where do parliamentary translators fit into this broad picture I have just painted of the Translation Bureau? Essentially two directorates are attached to Parliament: the Interpretation Directorate with which I will deal only briefly here, and the Parliamentary Translation Directorate. The Interpretation Directorate employs some 80 interpreters who provide the simultaneous interpretation for the two Houses of Parliament and their committees. The Parliamentary Translation Directorate has a total of 75 translators and a support staff of 25 people divided into four specialized sections.

The Debates, the oldest service and the one most faithful to tradition, is responsible for translating into both official languages the proceedings in both Houses of Parliament, namely the speeches delivered by MPs and Senators. It is by no means an easy task, considering that each member of this service must translate an average of about 4,000 words a day so that our country's elected officials can receive by 9 a.m. the next day the printed, bilingual issue of the previous day's proceedings in the Senate and House of Commons. This daily challenge requires the co-operation not only of the translators but of numerous other people including stenographers, printers, clerks, etc.

The remaining work, which is no less important to the smooth running of our bilingual parliamentary system, is shared by three sections.

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The first, referred to as Parliamentary Documents, meets the translation needs of the House of Commons Administration and the Library of Parliament. This section handles a wide variety of texts, from purely administrative documents to research papers drafted by the Library of Parliament Research Branch touching on such topics as the economy, law and current events such as transportation of natural gas, the status of women, abortion, child abuse and world nickel production.

The second section goes by the name of Committees' Documents. Its translators are basically at the service of House of Commons committees. They are called upon to translate virtually anything related to national and international politics. Whether it be finance, law, budgets, transportation, health, art, computer programming or the constitution, translators must be prepared to deal with and understand these issues. When a committee undertakes to study a burning issue, MPs are swamped by briefs from citizens and associations trying to defend their viewpoint before a piece of legislation is passed. Everything takes on an air of urgency. In order for witnesses and committee members to discuss a topic, they need to understand one another and in Canada, understanding often comes about as a result of the translation process.

The third section, Members' Service, is responsible for meeting the translation needs of MPs and Senators in their capacity as legislators and representatives of the people. In all, service must be provided to some 400 officials who are often pressed for time and sometimes not very understanding of difficulties involved in translating. However this work enables the translator to gauge public opinion through letters exchanged between the MP and his constituents, to get a clear picture of the problems encountered by the elderly or the unemployed, to gain awareness of the difficulties which arise in relations between citizens and the public service or to learn how a policy evolves through various studies which have to be translated. Our clients can rest assured that we are sworn to secrecy.

Some of the most stimulating work is done for the Parliamentary Relations Secretariat. Canada maintains relations with many countries and Canadian parliamentary delegations travelling abroad often require bilingual documentation to make their task an easier one. Our mandate even extends to organizing the necessary translation services for certain international conferences of parliamentarians.

The three sections just described share responsibility for translating the proceedings of the Senate committees, a task which is generally done in one day at a rate of about 3,500 words per translator. Although far from easy, this work is somewhat less strenuous since it involves the spoken language. Judging by the volume of words translated, the Senate is still very much alive and kicking.

The annual budget for the Parliamentary Translation Directorate, including staff salaries, totals \$3 million. The staff is divided as follows: 75 professional staff, 13 support staff (typists) and 12 administrative support staff.

In 1981-82, the Directorate translated 21 million words, a total which represents 68 printed volumes each containing 500 pages, at a cost of 14 cents per translated word. This figure does not include the cost of certain centralized services such as ter-

minology and documentation which come under another branch of the Bureau.

To compensate for some of the inconveniences inherent in their job, employees of the Translation Bureau who work for Parliament receive, in addition to the three or four weeks of annual leave enjoyed by federal public servants, additional leave credits for overtime. The number of credits granted is calculated on a *pro rata* basis according to the number of days worked by the translator while Parliament was in session. The leave accumulated in this manner cannot normally be taken while the House is sitting, which means that when Parliament sits into July or August, or even uninterrupted until Christmas, as was the case the year of the flag debate in 1964, many problems can arise. Early family vacation and travel plans and reservations are often out of the question because there is always the possibility that the translators may have to cancel plans at the last minute. The new standing orders adopted by the House of Commons in late 1982 should resolve this problem in part by creating a fixed parliamentary calendar.

The translator must display great physical resistance at certain times of the year when the pace is hectic since work cannot be put off until the following day. Absences are not looked upon favourably by colleagues since they must assume the missing translator's share of the workload. Availability is also a chief quality of the parliamentary translator who may, on short notice, be asked to work irregular hours during the evening or into the night or even on weekends. A few years ago, the debate translators barely had the time to leave their desks to hastily attend Christmas Eve festivities with their families.

The work of a parliamentary translator is extremely varied, covering a broad range of current topics and events. Translators must be interested in almost all areas of human endeavor. One of the most persistent problems they face, particularly after normal working hours, is that of obtaining the necessary documentation to do a translation. While translators can rely on excellent library facilities, there is always the danger of being caught short when a committee asks to have translated a sketch of the control panel of a Boeing 747 by 9 a.m. the following morning. Yet we were asked and were able to do just that, although it is unlikely that any Boeing aircraft pilot will ever use our translation! Because of unforeseeable circumstances, we have even had to translate an international treaty (for example, on air transportation) which is already available in all of the UN's official languages simply because it would take too long to obtain a copy of the document from Montreal. These occasional emergencies make life difficult for the parliamentary translator, but I do not know of anyone who would willingly return to a departmental translation section.

To conclude, I would like to call to mind an often misunderstood old Italian saying *Traduttore, traditore*, which essentially means a translator is often an unintentional traitor in that it is sometimes impossible for him to convey the exact thoughts of the author. Despite this fact, a translator's profession, indeed his art, is nevertheless essential to human communications. A computer has not yet succeeded in equalling the intelligence or creativity of a translator. It is undoubtedly for this reason that for many years to come, we will continue to acknowledge the discreet, albeit constant, and effective presence of our translators on Parliament Hill.