Fifty Years of Parliamentary Interpretation

by Jean Delisle

January 15, 1959 was a historic day for Parliament. On that date, simultaneous interpretation was introduced in the House of Commons. During the 1958 election campaign, John Diefenbaker had promised Francophone Canadians bilingual cheques and "instantaneous translation" of Commons debates. On election day, March 31, 1958, his party received the largest majority in the country's history, winning 208 out of 265 seats, including 50 of Quebec's 75 seats. Since January 15, 1959, every word spoken in the House of Commons is interpreted simultaneously, whatever the political adherence of the person speaking. Unilingual Members can speak freely in their own language, safe in the knowledge that they will be understood by everyone, including visitors and journalists in the galleries. This new service was considered a constitutional necessity that would give tangible rather than merely symbolic support to bilingualism in Parliament, the cornerstone of Canadian institutions. This article highlights the development of simultaneous interpretation in Canada.

The introduction of simultaneous interpretation did not unleash the same uproar as the bill to centralize translation services within the federal government, which had been introduced 25 years earlier and led to the creation of the Translation Bureau in 1934. While Secretary of State Charles H. Cahan's bill raised a great hue and cry among translators and journalists, the proposal to introduce interpretation services in the House of Commons promptly rallied everyone involved. Only a few Members were critical, and their comments focused mainly on the slow pace of decision making.

In 1936, Belgium was the first country to introduce parliamentary interpretation, following repeated demands by Léon Degrelle's Rexist Party. Switzerland launched a service in 1946. In the late 1940s, several Canadian organizations began experimenting with mobile facilities for simultaneous interpretation. The University of Montréal was a pioneer in "microphone interpretation," which it introduced on a trial basis in 1949. The course was integrated into a master's program in translation and interpretation two years later.

Jean Delisle is Professor Emeritus at the University of Ottawa. This year marks not only the 50th anniversary of parliamentary interpretation, but also the 75th anniversary of the Translation Bureau (1934) and the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act (1969).

The Origins of Parliamentary Interpretation

The history of parliamentary interpretation in Canada can be traced back to December 11, 1952, when J.-Eugène Lefrançois, MP for Laurier, rose to speak in the House of Commons for the first time since his election. He ended with this statement:

> In closing my remarks, I should like to express the hope that the government, after having gratified us with such a perfect loudspeaker system, will favour us with a system of simultaneous translation which would allow everyone to hear

> all the speeches in his own language, regardless of the one used by the speaker.

This was the first time that the possibility of providing parliamentarians with interpretation services had been raised in the Commons.

Four months earlier, a journalist at the Montréal daily *Le Canada* had suggested the idea in an editorial. He felt that the innovative service offered definite advantages and could lead to another marvel:

> simultaneous and mechanical translation," which was being used to great effect at the United Nations and had been a huge success when tested the previous year in Ottawa at the North Atlantic Alliance conference. The journalist remarked that Anglophone and Francophone Members would hear and understand each other better, and the whole country would benefit.

Pierre Vigeant, a reporter at *Le Devoir*, hurried to support the proposal the next day.

> He supported the installation of such a system, stating that it was virtually impossible to be a Minister if you could not speak English well. No matter how skilled and eloquent French-speaking Members might be, a parliamentary career in Ottawa demanded a knowledge of English. And no matter how well Francophone Members spoke English, he continued, they could rarely impart the same clarity and nuance as in their mother tongue. Consequently, they could not participate fully in debates.

The two journalists made a convincing argument: Simultaneous interpretation would strengthen parliamentary democracy.

Lefrançois's wish did not go unnoticed by Aldéric-Hermas Beaubien, Superintendent of the Translation Bureau. He realized that no one on his staff was truly competent in simultaneous interpretation. He feared that the Bureau would be caught flat-footed if the government decided to introduce the service in the House of Commons. He asked his deputy minister, Charles Stein, for permission to travel to New York to see how translation and interpretation services were set up at the United Nations. One of the ideas he brought back from his research trip was to give dictating machines to some of the translators in Debates to increase their productivity. These machines would play an important role in preparing the first interpreters.

At the time, opinion was divided on the usefulness of an interpretation service. Charles Cannon, MP for Îles-de-la-Madeleine, was among the supporters: "If simultaneous translation has proved satisfactory to the great majority of delegates at the United Nations, I believe it would be easier to introduce this system here, where we only have two official languages." Alexis Caron, MP for Hull, took the opposite view, fearing that parliamentarians would stop trying to learn the other official language. Lester B. Pearson, Leader of the Official Opposition, agreed with Caron. Speaking off the record at the UN, he said that he was against the new service as it would give Anglophone MPs an excuse not to learn French. Other MPs pointed out the educational value of simultaneous interpretation and felt that the service would help parliamentarians learn English or French. It is worth remembering that only about 15 of the 265 MPs were truly bilingual at the time. Consequently, Commons debates were usually in English, and Francophone Members rarely spoke. J.-Eugène Lefrançois was a case in point: elected in the general election of 1949, he made his maiden speech in the chamber over three years later! Nevertheless, some Members felt that it would be too expensive to equip the 275 seats on the chamber floor and the 625 seats in the galleries with individual earpieces. The estimated $6,300 for the equipment plus the four interpreters' salaries ($6,000 to $7,000 each) was deemed prohibitive.

> ***Simultaneous interpretation is surely the most exuberantly, bewilderingly surrealist profession.***
>
> *Thérèse Romer*

In 1956, Georges Villeneuve, MP for Roberval, reiterated the desire expressed by Lefrançois four years earlier. His motion regarding interpretation was printed in the *Notice Paper* but never debated. In the meantime, several Members spoke on the benefits of simultaneous interpretation at the UN, where it had been in use since 1946, and in Israel's parliament, the Knesset.

National associations that advocated simultaneous interpretation in Parliament showed their support by making submissions to Cabinet and to the Commons Speaker in 1956. One of these groups was the 25,000-member Canadian Junior Chamber of Commerce, which had been using simultaneous interpretation to hold its meetings in English and French since 1953. It also loaned the system to various national organizations. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, or CCF as it was better known, prepared a Cabinet submission asking the government to make an interpretation service available to national associations for their conferences. It was suggested that the

Department of Citizenship and Immigration be given responsibility for the service. Associations wishing to use it would simply pay a modest fee since the purpose of the service would be to bring the country's two major linguistic groups closer together and strengthen Canadian unity. Simultaneous interpretation was seen as being in the national interest. It would be nothing less than a "Canadian institution" according to Pierre Vigeant. This new communications technique began to take hold and win the support of organizers of national and international meetings.

In the summer of 1957, before Parliament was summoned, the Post Office Department installed a temporary interpretation system in the Commons chamber for a meeting of the Universal Postal Union, an organization that operated solely in French. During the conference, delegates from 96 countries communicated through interpreters. This international forum played a decisive role in the events that followed.

After the conference, Francophone journalists launched a systematic campaign to introduce simultaneous interpretation in Parliament and called for the temporary facilities to be made permanent. Pierre Vigeant alone published some 10 articles on the subject in *Le Devoir*. Cabinet took note and referred the matter for study to the House's internal economy committee on November 22, 1957.

But before the committee could even table its report, Maurice Breton, Liberal MP for Joliette–L'Assomption–Montcalm and a strong supporter of simultaneous interpretation, surprised the Commons by moving on November 25 that "the government should take into consideration the advisability of setting up a special committee of Parliament for the purpose of considering the establishment of a system of simultaneous translation." The motion met with widespread approval during the long debate that followed, and Members on both sides of the House expressed their enthusiastic support.

Another significant event helped to speed up the process. In January 1958, the CBC asked Andrée Francœur, André d'Allemagne and Blake T. Hanna, three graduates in interpretation from the University of Montréal, to provide simultaneous interpretation in English and French of the speeches given at the Liberal Party convention in Ottawa. The national experiment was a huge success and a first in the short history of interpretation and television broadcasting in Canada. In the spirit of democracy, the CCF offered simultaneous interpretation at its national convention in Montréal at about the same time, so that all participants could express their point of view.

Meanwhile, things were moving along quietly in Cabinet. At a meeting held February 5, Ministers decided to renew the contract for sound amplification in the Commons chamber and install the necessary wiring for interpretation in anticipation of the system being approved. Ministers also raised the issue of training for interpreters and asked that it begin as soon as possible. On June 24, Cabinet decided to have a simultaneous interpretation system installed, but did not make the decision public since a major announcement like this was Prime Minister Diefenbaker's prerogative.

Diefenbaker was keen to keep his election promise and, buoyed by the many conclusive experiments and repeated calls by MPs, journalists and national organizations, he tabled the following motion on August 11, 1958:

> That this House do approve the installation of a simultaneous translation system in this Chamber and that Mr. Speaker be authorized to make arrangements necessary to install and operate it.

Members passed the motion unanimously. Parliamentary interpretation was seen as a way to bring together Canadians from the country's two major language groups. Through its interpreters, the Translation Bureau would participate even more actively in the business of government and help to convey the image of institutional bilingualism to the public. Pearson had since been convinced of the benefits of simultaneous interpretation and was singularly optimistic that bilingualism would one day be so common among Canadians and parliamentarians that "simultaneous translation will not be needed and the facilities for that purpose can be taken out of the House as not needed and moved over to the museum or the public archives." Admittedly, that day has not arrived. Pearson, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957, was idealistic about the future of bilingualism in Canada, to say the least. All signs point to a heavy workload for interpreters for many years to come.

The First Interpreters

But who in the country could practise the mysterious art of interpretation, a job some people considered impossible? Raymond Robichaud wrote that simultaneous interpretation had an aura of mystery if not outright sorcery. You could almost smell the sulphur! Robichaud called it astounding that people could sit in front of a microphone, put on a headset and repeat in one language what they heard in another. The bilingual or trilingual people who could perform such a feat were rare birds. In 1958, there were only 250 recognized professional interpreters in the world, most of them in Europe. But interpretation had nothing to

do with magic or the occult. Two major events in the profession's development—the Nuremberg trials and the creation of the United Nations—had occurred just a few years previously, and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (IACI) had been established in Paris in 1953. The 1950s was a decade of organization for the profession.

Henriot Mayer, Head of Debates and future Superintendent of the Translation Bureau, organized a competition that led to the hiring of seven people. These pioneers of Canadian parliamentary interpretation quickly became known as the "Pleiades," a name given at different times in history to groups of seven poets considered "stars" in their field. This first group of interpreters consisted of Marguerite Ouimet, Valérie Sylt and Anthony Martin, and four translators from Debates—Raymond Aupy, Ernest Plante, Maurice Roy and Raymond Robichaud. This last member of the group was a graduate of the University of Ottawa and spoke German as well as English and French. He had been the generals' official interpreter during the Normandy invasion, and a liaison officer and French interpreter during the trial of SS General Kurt Meyer by a Canadian military court in Aurich, in December 1945. Robichaud had done consecutive and whispered interpretation, but not simultaneous. Originally from Luxembourg, Valérie Sylt had been interned in a concentration camp and was the only person in the group who had worked as a simultaneous interpreter. Marguerite Ouimet, one of the younger members of the group, had graduated from the University of Montréal in 1956. Anthony Martin, originally from Britain, had worked as a court reporter in Montréal. Andrée Francœur, a graduate of Geneva's School of Interpretation in 1955 and the University of Montréal in 1956, was also offered a position following the competition, but turned it down to pursue a freelance career in Montréal, as did Thérèse Romer. They were the first freelance interpreters in the country.

Interpreters Maurice Roy and Valérie Sylt. *(The Star Weekly, March 14, 1959. CRFCC, Ph 129-100).*

Thérèse Romer and Andrée Francœur, Canada's first two freelance conference interpreters. *(Roland Doré, Photolux, La Presse, March 17, 1960. CRFCC, Ph 129-296).*

The four translators from Debates were said to be doing "mechanical" translation and were nicknamed "the dictators" because they used dictating machines rather than typewriters when translating. This oral translation method was good preparation for simultaneous interpretation. The experienced translators were also well acquainted with parliamentary practices and traditions in Ottawa, which was a valuable asset for the line of work they were about to enter.

During the five months between adoption of the Prime Minister's motion and introduction of interpretation in the Commons, Henriot Mayer coordinated the group's training and organized the interpretation service. He also participated in "retraining" activities with the translators and was able to help the team out by interpreting occasionally. That is why the newspapers of the day spoke of eight rather than seven pioneer interpreters. Mayer had a makeshift booth built and placed in one of the two small rooms on the main floor of the West Block that were made available to the future interpreters. Since it was strictly prohibited to make live recordings of House of Commons debates at the time, the novice interpreters took turns reading excerpts from the parliamentary debates, which they recorded using tape recorders. The team used the tapes to practise simultaneous interpretation.

The interpreters were the object of some curiosity when they began working in the Commons chamber. Each desk was equipped with an earpiece and two buttons: one to select the language and the other to adjust the volume. Members were very pleased with their new system, even if they had to learn to insert their earpiece at the right time, plug it in properly and find the appropriate volume. They called their little earpiece "my translator." Some would have liked to

take it with them at the end of the day to use outside the chamber. The day after the service was introduced, the newspaper headlines proclaimed: "Traduction excellente en Chambre" (*La Presse*), "Translation System. A Howling Success!" (*The Ottawa Citizen*), "Les interprètes ont fait hier leurs premières armes" (*Le Droit*). Like the MPs, the journalists confused translation and interpretation, two very different professions in terms of techniques and skills. Two months after the service's introduction, *The Star Weekly* of Toronto ran a lengthy article on the new service, "Now-Instant Translation. M.P.'s Can Crash Language Barrier with Flick of Button," complete with photos. *Le Droit* reported that the interpreters performed their duties magnificently.

There was only one slightly sour note: some Anglophone listeners laughed at the strong British accent of one of the interpreters. The day after the service was introduced, Prime Minister Diefenbaker interrupted a discussion between a Minister and an MP to congratulate the interpreters publicly. He said he was delighted with the new system:

> Mr. Speaker, may I be allowed to say that I have listened to the translations passing back and forth as a result of the introduction of this simultaneous translation system, and I must say it is operating exceptionally well … I thought I should say it, in view of the fact that this is the first opportunity I have had to listen to the translation. The degree to which the translation follows the uttered word is really remarkable.

Not long afterward, it was necessary to "put a human face" on interpretation and remind MPs that it was a real person they heard when they turned the dial. To assist in the process, employee Monique Michaud made the rounds of MPs' and Ministers' offices to collect the speeches and translated questions that they intended to deliver in the House of Commons. The quality of interpretation improved as a result.

Interpreters: At the Heart of Parliamentary Life

For half a century, simultaneous interpretation has been a part of House of Commons proceedings. We cannot imagine Canadian parliamentary life without interpreters, who showed that interpretation is both feasible and useful. As Alfonso Gagliano, former Minister of Public Works and Government Services, said at a reception marking the 40th anniversary of interpretation in the House of Commons, "These highly trained professionals may be out of sight in the House of Commons as they work behind the scenes, but they are always within earshot!"

Parliamentary interpreters are noted for their high degree of professionalism. Simultaneous interpretation is no place for half measures: you either communicate the information or you do not. You cannot stop the continuous flow of words and go back to something said earlier.

Senior interpreter Raymond Robichaud and his assistant Ernest Plante. *(Photo: CRFCC, Ph 129-107).*

> ***Interpreters are not allowed to make mistakes. They are like trapeze artists who perform spectacular feats without a net. It takes nerves of steel as well as reliable, modern equipment and skilled technicians.***

The quality of interpretation depends on the efforts and talent of an entire team—just like in the movies. In the medium of relayed communications, the interpreter plays a starring role and cannot afford to step out of character.

Given the success of interpretation in the Lower House, the members of the Upper House quickly called for a similar service. But interpretation did not make its debut in the Senate until September 14, 1961, as delivery of the equipment from Great Britain was delayed by several months.

Parliamentary interpretation was originally part of Debates, but in the early 1960s it became a separate service under the leadership of Raymond Robichaud, who was known as the "Prince of Interpreters" or "Mr. Interpretation." Ernest Plante was his assistant. The reorganization was necessary following the service's rapid expansion. Interpreters were in great demand by parliamentary committees, federal departments, Canadian delegations overseas, extraparliamentary

conferences, national and international meetings, and other similar organizations and events. Interpretation is a good barometer of government activity. In the 1960s, a decade that interpreter Ronald Després called the "golden age of simultaneous interpretation," it was not unusual for interpreters to put in 80-hour weeks. Marguerite Ouimet said that she spent more time in a booth than at home, as did many of her colleagues. From the mid-1970s onward, technician Jean-Pierre Dulude, whose outstanding skill was widely recognized in interpretation circles, supervised the installation of some 60 interpreters' booths on Parliament Hill, and in federal departments and buildings across the country. He took great care to ensure that the booths met national standards.

John Diefenbaker, the man who set everything in motion, said in 1965, "I cannot visualize Canada without French Canada. I cannot visualize French Canada without Canada. National unity based on equality must be the goal." This equality cannot exist without linguistic parity inside Parliament itself. It is such a fundamental principle that it is enshrined in section 17 of *The Constitution Act, 1982*, which states that "Everyone has the right to use English or French in any debates and other proceedings of Parliament." The House cannot sit without interpreters and it has adjourned when the interpretation system experienced technical difficulties. Alfonso Gagliano was right when he said in 1999 that "simultaneous interpretation empowers the Members of Canada's House of Commons. It makes it possible for MPs to express themselves in the official language of their choice."

Today, interpreters barely raise an eyebrow in the House of Commons. They likely pass unnoticed because the interpretation process involves identifying with the person speaking. Raymond Robichaud liked to say that interpreters identify with the person they are interpreting in the same way that actors identify with their character. If all the world is a stage, as Shakespeare said, then interpreters have become an integral part of the scenery on the parliamentary stage, as they work behind the booth's darkened glass. What more fitting tribute could there be to interpreters' discretion, skill and artistry in the world of communication?