

REPORT

ON THE

TRANSLATION SERVICES

IN

BELGIUM AND SWITZERLAND

BY

ACHILLE FRECHETTE, I.S.O., K.C.,

Former Law Translator and Chief of the
Translation Branch of the House
of Commons of Canada.

REPRINT EDITION

OTTAWA

J. DE LABROQUERIE TACHÉ

PRINTER TO THE KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY

1920

Report on the Inquiry, requested by the Board of Internal Economy of the House of Commons of Canada, into the translation services of the Laws and Official Debates in Belgium and Switzerland.

To the Hon. the SPEAKER and
Members of the Board of Internal Economy,
House of Commons, Ottawa.

GENTLEMEN,—In compliance with the Minute of your Board of December 17, 1909, I proceeded in May last to Brussels and Berne, to inquire into the organization and working of the systems of translation obtaining in those capitals in consequence of the duality of official languages in Belgium, and of their plurality in Switzerland.

In order not to uselessly cumber the present report I shall take no account of the third national idiom of Switzerland, the Italian, which is only spoken by a numerically insignificant minority, and as to which the provisions for translation are but incidental and of no value in connection with the present inquiry.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS.

In Belgium the figure of the population does not differ materially from what it is in Canada. In Switzerland it is about half. As to the numbers of those who in both countries speak one or the other of the national languages (Italian excepted), the idiom of the majority in relation to that of the minority stands in much the same proportion as the English language to the French in Canada.

My inquiry has been directed to the translation of the Debates, of the Sessional Papers and of the Laws.

After stating the conditions found by me in these two countries in relation to these different services, the present report contains (in compliance with the Minute of your Board) such suggestions as I deem useful for the Canadian House of Commons' service.

THE DEBATES.

As is the case in Canada, the debates may be carried on in Belgium and in Switzerland in either or any of the official languages of the country.

In Belgium, where the House is composed of 152 representatives and sits from 2 to 5 o'clock, p.m., a Synoptic Report of the debates is issued the same evening. On the third day thereafter, at 8 p.m., a stenographic report is published under the name of *Annales Parlementaires*. These *Annales* contain the speeches in extenso, but only in the language in which they were made. If a member has not furnished his corrections of the stenographic report of his speech within 48 hours, the latter, instead of being published verbatim in the *Annales*, is only inserted in the condensed form as found in the Synoptic Report, with mention of the fact.

So that, in Belgium, the House debates are handled by three staffs: (a) Stenographers, as in the House of Commons in Canada; (b) *Précis* writers, who write a résumé of the speeches as they are being made and send their copy to the printer as fast as it is ready; and (c) Translators, who translate this résumé only.

These translators, four in number, do their work in the printing office, and translate from the first proof, which is given to them in turn in 40-line galleys. I visited them during a sitting of the House, and already a part of the matter for this sitting had been translated and was in the hands of the printers to be published with the rest

that evening. In this wise the morning newspapers for both languages have at hand a synopsis of the previous day's debates.

In Switzerland the stenographers take down only the debates on Federal laws and certain Federal arrêtés (a term about corresponding to our Orders in Council). These speeches are published, in their own text only, in a Bulletin Stenographique, which hardly forms 600 pages at the end of the session. As to the rest, a translator sums up, verbally, in the House, in French if the speech was in German, and in German if it was in French, the conclusions of the different speeches.

The Swiss system, as to the Debates, differs too radically from ours in aims, methods and results, to make a more detailed account of it useful.

It only remains, under this head, to state that the Belgian system, which is much more expeditious than ours, must also be, it seems to me, much less costly, inasmuch as the speeches are published in extenso in their original language only, and that only a résumé thereof is translated for the needs of the day.

THE SESSIONAL PAPERS.

In Belgium, all Government communications with the public are matters for translation. Public notices, signs, postage stamps, railway guides, all are bilingual. On the geographical maps the names of places are first in French for the French parts of the country, while they are first in Flemish in the Flemish regions. As to the coins and bank notes, they are issued in each language alternately.

All the translation necessitated by this duality of languages is done in offices to be found hereinafter stated.

Each of the different Departments has its own translation staff, except the Department of Foreign Affairs, the occasional translation business of which is done by the very comprehensive staff of the Ministère des Chemins de fer, Postes, Télégraphes et Marine, counting 16 members. Beside the work for the Foreign Affairs, this staff is also expected to do that of the Universal Postal Union, the International Conventions and the proceedings of the Peace Conference. The Finance Department has 1 translator proper; Science and Fine Arts, 2; Interior and Agriculture, 2; War, 3; Justice, 3; Colonies, 2; Public Works, 1.

Candidates—who must be young—for positions of translators undergo an examination. The Department of Railways, etc., requires four years of preliminary technical service in the railways, posts or telegraphs.

All reports and documents to be transmitted to the Houses by a Department and which are to be published are furnished by that Department in both languages.

The Houses of Representatives has no other translation staff proper than that which translates the Synoptic Report of the Debates.

I will speak later of the translation of the Laws.

So much as to Belgium.

It was stated above, under the head of the Debates, that, during the sittings of the Conseil National, which in Switzerland is the legislative body corresponding to the Canadian House of Commons, a translator sums up *viva voce* the conclusions of the speeches in German, if these were in French, and in French if the member spoke in German. He is the only translator belonging to the House.

The various Departments have their own translators, and the translation made by them are, when the matter requires it, subject to revision by the Chancellerie fédérale, a kind of general secretary's office, where, besides, are written in the several national languages the documents which emanate from that office. The Chancellerie has also its own staff of translators.

Thus it is seen that nowhere in these two countries is translation centralized. And in both countries satisfaction is expressed with the system in use.

Let us now consider the system that obtains in the Canadian House of Commons. The service, there, is centralized in an office recruited—may I be permitted to say—

independently of any idea of specialization in the work. Of course, the great variety of different technical matters which find their place in the Sessional papers is too well known to the members of the Board for their enumeration being otherwise than superfluous here; however, it is proper for me to say that all the arts, the sciences, the industries, the interests with which the government of the country is concerned, in turn call for the earnest labour of the House of Commons translator. It is evident that so many various translations, for which the most extensive dictionaries and the usual language are altogether inadequate, must require from the translator vast erudition, constantly supplemented through long hours of research and tireless application. Would it not be too optimistic to expect great success from the anomaly of an organization where it is required of each man to be a universal specialist in order to be fit for expert work in all directions?

All the efforts that the Chief Translator may make towards specializing the abilities of his staff are rendered vain by the manner in which the documents come from the printing office and by the necessity of having the work done quickly. Without entering into more details, I will say that constantly a given work has to be divided among several translators, either in the office or outside. And what is the consequence? If each man, although he feels no personal responsibility for the work, makes the study it requires, no time will have been gained. If such studies are not made, that part of the work which is improperly done will swamp that done by the conscientious translator who knows his subject and its terminology.

The tendency of all this is towards the demoralization of the service. And the French version of the documents suffers in quality, although, in spite of all efforts, it still reaches the public much later than the English version, for the main reason that the latter is received too late by the translators.

The present system, established some seventy years ago, may have answered the needs of the time, when the public documents were very far from being as voluminous, as numerous and as specialized as they are to-day, and when the greater part of them, being already in French, had not to go through the French office. But now that the publications of the public service deal with so many activities unknown to the primitive country that we were then; now that all the human interests, more and more specialized, find their expression in the papers presented to the Canadian Parliament, a centralized translation office can no longer do justice to so much work that calls for specialists. The experience I have acquired during thirty-six years of service in the Commons has convinced me that in centralization rests the vice of our system.

Therefore, and from my observations in Belgium and Switzerland, where I everywhere found specialization carried as far as possible by the establishment of provisions for translation in the various administrative branches, and where there is thorough satisfaction with the system in existence, I conclude that it is desirable to extend in Canada to all the Departments, the practice already intelligently introduced in some of them, as, for instance, the Department of Agriculture, and very recently, if I am not mistaken, that of Marine and Fisheries; and that departmental officers be given the duties of translating the annual reports of their Departments and, among the other papers furnished by them to Parliament, those which the Printing Committee would recommend to be printed. The departmental translator having a narrower field of work could comparatively soon master the two languages in the specialties dealt with every year in the documents issued by his Department. He could do his work much quicker and much better, all other things being equal. His direct responsibility for the French version of the departmental publications would also naturally have a tendency to secure his best efforts.

Even the original of certain annual reports might find itself indirectly improved. For instance, a department needs for its own work, say some fifty copies of certain statistics or other matter that are of absolutely no use to the public; instead of burdening its appropriation with such printing, it finds it cheaper to have it paid for by Parliament and loads therewith its annual report. Now, the reports to Parliament

49
 are printed in full as presented, by thousands of copies. This means the costly translation and printing in both languages of voluminous matter which is never to be read outside of the Department by any one but the translator and the printer.

Were the costs of printing and translation to be borne by the Department—the translator might in certain Departments be also the editor of the English reports—the tendency would be to rid the annual reports of the unnecessary matter among which is often lost much of the useful information they are intended to convey.

The proper matter might, as soon as decided upon during the year, be put into the hands of the departmental translator, either in the original form or as a first proof. The translation being thus done simultaneously in the different departments and in proper time, nothing would further be in the way of the reports being presented to the Houses in both languages at the same time. But the example of the Department of Agriculture will show what progress, what improvement may be realized by the establishment of a service of translation within the departments.

I may perhaps be permitted to suggest that a favourable time for this change, as far as the Translation Branch of the House of Commons is concerned, is the present, or the near future. Of course it would mean the removal of most of the work now devolving upon it. But the change would automatically put an end to the employment of all extra translators by the House, the number of which has gradually become perhaps somewhat of an abuse. On the other hand my own superannuation and some early contingencies which it is allowable to expect, would reduce the translation staff to no more than would be necessary, under the circumstances, for what work would remain to be done.

It would then be advisable to dispense with the proofreaders attached to the office. The work of the translators not being henceforth so heavy, the latter would have time for reading their own proofs, and their work would gain from this additional reading.

Later, it may be found expedient to transfer to the Translation Branch the translation of the Minutes and Proceedings.

I might add that the expenditure entailed by this change upon the Departments would thus be accomplished by a vast reduction in that of the Commons.

THE LAWS.

There exists in Belgium, for the two Houses, a joint office for the translation of the Laws. Formerly all the Laws were, as they are with us, translated by the law translator of the one or the other House, as the case may be. To-day all Government Bills are drafted and translated in the Department concerned, and the translation is passed to the joint office above mentioned, for verbal revision, just as with us most of the Government Bills are now drafted in the departments and passed to the Law Clerk of the Senate or of the Commons. The intent of the Bill, from the technical point of view, is secured by the special translator of the Department who, besides, holds himself in communication with the above joint office. The amendments to such Bills, passed in either House are translated in the joint office, in collaboration with the departmental translator if his services are needed.

The private Bills and the public Bills from private members, as well as their amendments, are translated in the joint office.

This joint office organization was resorted to in order to secure for the texts an homogeneity which could not always characterize them otherwise, particularly when amendments passed in one Chamber are translated—often necessarily in haste—by a translator who has not previously had the opportunity of studying the Bill or the terminology used therein by its translator, a circumstance which is not without some danger.

I found practically the same system in Switzerland, with about the only difference that there the duties of the Belgian joint law translators fall upon the Chancellerie fédérale, of which I have already spoken.

SUPPLEMENTARY REMARKS.

In order to avoid lengthy or complicated statements which would have uselessly interfered with the clearness of this report, I have confined myself to the consideration of things in their connection with the legislative bodies corresponding to our popular House. It remains to say that in each of the countries visited for the present purpose, the translation services for the Upper and the Lower Houses are carried on along practically similar lines.

I wish to add, Mr. Speaker and Gentlemen of the Board, that, if my services can be considered as of use either on this side of the Atlantic, to carry further the present inquiry in any direction you might desire, or in Canada, for the elaboration of such modification of our system as it may have suggested to you, I earnestly beg you to reckon them as at your disposal whether in Canada or in Europe, where I am now staying with my family.

I would fail in a due sense of gratitude if I were to close the present report without stating that, wherever I have applied for information in the course of the inquiry of which the above is the result, I have only found the most generous courtesy from every one and the eager manifestations of an earnest desire to facilitate the accomplishment of my mission.

I have the honour to be,
 Mr. Speaker and Gentlemen of the Board,
 Your obedient servant,

ACHILLE FRECHETTE.

PARIS, September, 1910.