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SERVING OFFICIAL BILINGUALISM FOR HALF A CENTURY

Riddle: name the giant that has 900 translators, about 100 interpreters, a similar number of terminologists and managers, and a support staff of 550 serving 150 client organizations; three terminals – Victor, Hortense and Penelope – linked to a computer that translates over 8,000,000 words each and every year; dozens of word processors with video display screens; a computerized terminology bank that boasts 1,500,000 entries; seven Grapho-Braille terminals enabling visually handicapped users to access this electronic dictionary and over 400 data bases; 16 word-counters; and regional offices located across the country from Chilliwack, British Columbia to Halifax, Nova Scotia and in Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City and Moncton.

The answer, as you have probably guessed, is the Government of Canada's Translation Bureau, a component of the Department of the Secretary of State administered by an Assistant Under Secretary of State (Official Languages and Translation).

In 1984, the Bureau celebrated 50 years of operation. Like the translator's daily work, tis fiftieth anniversary passed unnoticed by the media. In their defence, however, 1984 was an unusually eventful year: visits by the Pope and the Queen, the federal election and the Olympic Games, to mention only a few. *Language and Society* has decided to fill the breach and pay homage to the Translation Bureau's unsung but vital contribution to Canada's federal institutions.

The Cahan Bill: a bombshell

In 1934, fewer than 100 translators were responsible for the French translation of House of Commons debates, departmental annual reports and other major public documents. As a result, only one-third of government publications appeared in French, sometimes two years or more after the English version. For many years, journalists and political figures from French-speaking Canada denounced this situation. Within the federal apparatus, English was the only language of work and, in the view of many public servants, translation was little

more than a "necessary evil." Sweeping language demands by the Francophone minority were yet to come.

On January 29, 1934, during the height of the economic depression that gripped the country, Charles Hazlitt Cahan tabled a bill proposing that all translators working in the federal public service be centralized into a *single bureau*.

Largely motivated by reasons of administrative efficiency and economy (11 translator positions had already been eliminated and the decision to abolish another 20 section chief positions was in the works), this initiative immediately raised a public outcry. The French-language press, associations for the protection of Francophone interests in Canada and the Quebec contingent of R. B. Bennett's Conservative government joined forces to oppose the bill which, they feared, would cause a serious setback to French services within the federal apparatus.

Journalists capitalized on the controversy by accusing the governement of disregarding the provisions of the British North America Act and by demanding safeguards for French rights in Canada. The translators, who were the most directly concerned, became disturbed with the change of events. Those employed by the parliamentary divisions (Laws and Debates) feared they would lose certain benefits such as their six or seven months of leave while Parliament was not in session.

To the great surprise of Minister Cahan, his proposed administrative reorganization was seen as "the most devastating blow dealt to French influence in the federal government in a long time."[1] The Minister, however, saw numerous advantages in the proposed reform. He declared in the House of Commons:

> A reorganization such as that proposed in this bill (...) will avoid duplication of translation services and research work in relation thereto. It will ensure the

[1] Charles Gauthier, "Le bill Cahan", in *Le Droit*, January 30, 1934, p. 3. This editorial writer was one of the most ardent opponents of the centralization of federal translation services. Ironically, as fate would have it, he ended his career as a section chief of translation in the Department of the Secretary of State.

> effective co-operation of all officers and employees in the existing translation services. It will establish co-ordination and uniformity in the proper use of technical terms. (...) It will tend to remove all discriminations in working hours and working conditions, and it will promote – and this is essential – the contemporaneous publication of public documents in both English and French for the use of Parliament and of the public.[2]

Despite opposition, the bill limped through all steps of the parliamentary process and was finally adopted in its original form on June 13. It received royal assent on June 28. Section 3 of the new Act respecting the Bureau for Translations lists, in general terms, the duties and functions of the new agency:

... collaborate with and act for all departments of the public service, and both houses of the Parliament of Canada and all bureaus, branches, commissions and agencies created or appointed by Act of Parliament, or by order of the governor-in-council, in making and revising all translations from one language into another of all departmental and other reports, documents, debates, bills, acts, proceedings and correspondence.

The only direct effects of the Act were to place all federal translators under the authority of the Secretary of State, make them subject to the provisions of the Civil Service Act, establish a Bureau and create the position of superintendent. The Act did not lead to the centralization of all translators in a single location. Influential deputy ministers were able to convince the Secretary of State and the first superintendent, Domitien T. Robichaud, that it would be better to leave translators in the departments without necessarily sacrificing administrative centralization in one unified service. The superintendent was thereafter charged with responsibility for co-ordinating all federal government translation services.

Over the pas 50 years, the face of the Translation Bureau has changed considerably. Its transition can be divided into two major periods: the first covers approximately 30 years, from the date of its establishment to the mid-sixties, when the B and B Commission was

[2] Charles Hazlitt Cahan, *House of Commons Debates*, February 27, 1934, p. 986.

created; the second covers the past 20 years, during which time the Official Languages Act (1969) has exercised a decisive influence over the Bureau's growth.

Improvement and diversification of translation service (1934-64)

During its first 30 years of operation, the Bureau underwent slow but steady growth (see tables and charts). Its volume gradually increased, and stood at 119 million words in 1964. Staff increases were very gradual (an average of eight new recruits per year); from 1934 to 1964, its establishment grew from 74 to 320 employees. In their annual reports, superintendents repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of recruiting qualified translators, a permanent problem for the Bureau. The major concern of Bureau authorities during this period was to speed up publication of the French version of official documents. To achieve simultaneous publication – or close to it – in both official languages of deliberations of the two Houses of Parliament, the first superintendent introduced the system of night work in the Debates Division. This bold initiative produced the desired results and the nightly system of translating the utterances of our MPs from one official language to another for Canadians from coast to coast continues to this day.

As of 1935-36, the rational use of human resources also made it possible to publish simultaneous French and English versions of departmental annual reports, to the satisfaction of the Francophone press. This was not the case for all government documents. As one reporter wrote in 1948, "Still too often the French version is only available several weeks or months after the English version. However, there has been some improvement in this regard."[3]

During this period, the Bureau began to diversify and, albeit nervously, decentralize its services. In 1953, it established the beginnings of a terminology service to remedy the shortage of dictionaries and reference works from which divisions still suffer. Through its publications, the terminology service established the Bureau's first contacts outside the

[3] Pierre Vigeant, "Un siècle après la reconnaissance officielle de la langue française", in *L'action Nationale*, N° 31, 1940, p. 300.

federal public service.

The inauguration of simultaneous interpretation in the House of Commons and the Senate was one of the most important events in the Bureau's history. The possibility of providing such a service was first raised by an MP in 1952. Over the next six years, the idea was taken up by several national associations who joined reporters in a campaign to install a simultaneous interpretation service in Parliament.

On August 11, 1958, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker tabled the following motion in the House of Commons: "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 instal and operate it."

Some feared that such a move would entice members to slacken their efforts to learn the other official language[4]; others felt the cost of installing such a system was prohibitive ($39,375). Notwithstanding these few reservations, the motion was greeted with enthusiasm by the large majority of Members and, in the end, received unanimous approval. Parliamentary interpretation was seen by some as a symbol of national unity and as a means of bringing Canada's two major language groups closer together.

Seven interpreters, four of them "recycled" translators, were the country's first team of parliamentary interpreters. On January 16, 1959, after five months of training, these pioneers made their debut in the House of Commons. Since then (and especially since televised coverage of House of Commons debates in 1977), parliamentary interpreters have helped convey the image of official bilingualism to the Canadian people.

Twenty years of rapid expansion (1964-84)

[4] We should here note the words written last year by the publisher of *L'Actualité*, Jean Paré, himself a translator and twice winner of the Canada Council's translation award: "These (translation and parliamentary interpretation) services were not created so that political figures could avoid learning the official languages. They are intended for the citizens of Canada. And they should be enable public servants to work in their mother tongue. In a bilingual nation, it is up to institutions and political figures to be bilingual so that citizens can remain unilingual." [trans.] ("La plume de ma tante...", in *L'Actualité*, August 1983, p. 8.)

As of 1964, the Bureau was caught up by the bilingualism and biculturalism movement that swept the country. Political leaders of the day displayed a distinct desire to affirm Canada's bilingual character. Riding on this powerful tide, the Bureau's mandate and spheres of interest were broadened, its staff quadrupled within the space of 10 years, and its budget soared from $2 million to $82 million. Some went so far as to suggest the creation of a Department of Translation. The magnitude of this expansion can be seen in the attached tables and charts.

In 1964, growth in the volume of federal government translation obliged the Cabinet to approve regulations under the Translation Bureau Act to tighten up translation co-ordination and establish an order of priority for the translation of official documents.

In November, 1974, the Cabinet gave the Bureau responsibility for "verifying and standardizing English and French terminology used throughout the federal public service and in all government agencies reporting to the Parliament of Canada." This Cabinet directive gave the Bureau the task of promoting good usage in administrative language and terminology and, in a sense, a large degree of authority over matters concerning the quality and evolution of administrative language.

Earlier the same year, Treasury Board had asked the Bureau to establish "a bank of terms and equivalents to meet the needs of Parliament, the Government and public bodies coming under its authority, in order to increase the efficiency of translation in all fields, especially the sciences and technology."

The Bureau immediately began to develop a computerized data bank which currently contains over 1,600,000 terms. Besides translators, the bank is used by all public servants engaged in drafting or adapting administrative texts, those involved in language training programmes and those responsible for implementing legislation and regulations. The general public also has access to the bank, which is linked more than 160 terminals across Canada and throughout the world. The creation of this modern terminological documentation tool has helped give recognition to a new profession, an offshoot of translation, that of the "terminologist."

During the same period, the Bureau successfully experimented with the first

operational applications of machine translation. Since June, 1977, 5,000 Environment Canada weather forecasts have been translated by computer, resulting in substantial savings and establishing Canada's place as a leader in machine translation.[5]

While the Translation Bureau is a good indicator of the progress of official bilingualism in Canada, the Multilingual Services Directorate is a reliable measure of our country's international interests: "Translators Carry Canada's Good Name" (*The Citizen*). Its growth runs parallel to that of Canada's political and trade relations with foreign countries and is indicative of the interest of Canadian scientists in the work of their foreign counterparts. The technical and scientific translations performed by this Directorate far outnumber those of any other type of text. Besides its 80 or so permanent staff, the Directorate also uses the services of approximately 500 free lances. It translates roughly 20 million words a years from approximately 60 languages and into about 15.

Over the years, the Translation Bureau has become a truly multipurpose national language service. In addition to its traditional functions (translation and interpretation of official and foreign languages), the Bureau currently offers sign-language interpretation to the hearing-impaired, provides research services and disseminates terminological data.[6] It also subsidizes research into artificial intelligence to improve machine translation, is responsible for standardizing administrative language, and provides writing assistance services and suggestions, not only to federal public servants, but also to some provincial governments who wish to take advantage of the experience and skills of its staff.

The scope of its activities is by no means limited to the federal public service; it participates at the provincial level and in private industry. The current Assitant Under

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[5] *Language and Society* has already dealt with this topic. Cf. Marcel Paré, "The letter, the spirit and the machine"., Nº 3, 1980, p. 19-22). Literary translation (not covered here) was also the subject of an article in this magazine. Cf. Philip Stratford, "A bridge between two solitudes", nº. 11, 1983, p. 8-13.

[6] *Terminology Today* and *Terminology Bulletin* (bilingual vocabularies devoted to various fields of activity such as statistics, finance, social services, electronics, flora, etc.) are two publications through which the Bureau disseminates this information. The terminology bank performs the same function.

Secretary of State, Alain Landry, is responsible for developing and updating the Departments's policy for the promotion of official languages both in the private sector (non-profit organizations and corporations) and in non-federal public sectors (provincial, territorial and municipal administrations, schools, hospitals and social service agencies).

Lastly, the Bureau has become the federal government's principal representative on the international language scene. It maintains regular contact with major international organizations working in its areas of specialization: the large European terminology banks, the *Association française de normalisation* (AFNOR), the International Standards Organization (ISO), the International Centre for Terminological Information (INFOTERM), and so on.

The work of its terminologists, its accomplishments in machine translation, its technological innovations and its novel, modern organization of work have firmly established the Translation Bureau's reputation both within Canada and abroad.

Food for thought

The Translation Bureau is now a key instrument in the application of federal official bilingualism and multiculturalism. If Canada's reputation for translation is one of the best in the world, it is partly because the major objectives of its language policy are *political* objectives. Translation is not conducted here solely for economic or cultural reasons. Canada has chosen to "entrench" its dual cultural heritage in its institutions and, as a result, official translation has taken firm root. While it would be an exaggeration to say "No translation, no Canada", by the same token it could be said that, without the army of translators working for the fedral government, Canada would have a totally different character. Translation is an inalienable part of the *Canadian way of Life.*

The current Commissioner of Official Languages, D'Iberville Fortier, aptly stated in a speech that "the statistics on how translation is used speak volumes on the relative standing,

weight, vitality and independence of one language vis-à-vis another."[7] Although the Translation Bureau has changed profoundly over the past half-century, one thing remains unchanged: the proportion of official translation from French to English *has never exceeded 15 per cent* in spite of the B and B Commission and the Official Languages Act. Needless to say, the Bureau, which only translates what it is asked to do, is not responsible for this situation. However, many observers of the Canadian scene have noted this very significant disproportion over the past twenty years.

In 1969, in a study prepared for the B and B Commission, René de Chantal made the following comment on writing practices in the federal government:

> Why must texts be orginally drafted in English? [...] Why is the English-speaking Canadian considered able to create and the French-speaking Canadian to translate? [...] It is not up to me to provide the answer to these questions. In my view, however, when the federal government defines its policy of cultural and linguistic equality for the two founding peoples, it will have to take appropriate measures to ensure that translation is not a one-way street.[8]

Max Yalden voiced a similar observation in his Annual Report for 1980. "It is a melancholy fact that a very large proportion of the written material which the Federal Governement puts out in French is not originally drafted in that language but is the product of translation. [...] No matter what the quality of the translated text, the public service overwhelmingly conceives and expresses its ideas in what might be called an English style."[9] Perhaps both official languages have equal status, but one seems more equal than the other.

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[7] D'iberville Fortier, *Of Realism in Language Policy*. An address by the Commissioner of Official Languages before the National Symposium on Linguistic Services. Ottawa, October 10, 1984, p. 1.

[8] René de Chantal, *Rapport sur la qualité de la langue de quelques publications du gouvernement fédéral*. Task Force on Government Information, 1969, p. 32-33 (Unpublished).

[9] Max Yalden, *1980 Annual Report*, Ottawa, Department of Supply and Services, 1981, p. 63.

Even more recently, D'Iberville Fortier's comments strike a similar note:

> The fact of the matter is that French in Canada has long been, especially in matters of public administration, the language *into* which one translates. [...] There will always be a major need for translation in our country, but so long as the *one-way street phenomenon* remains so powerfully rooted in our national reality, one can hardly speak of linguistic equality notwithstanding all our efforts.[10]

These people in positions of authority are not alone in pleading for more "French-language drafting" within the federal government. The answer to that question is surely food for thought and a subject for many a good article yet to come.

Like the railroad a century ago, official translation helps bind the country together. What is difficult to understand, however, is why the language trains do not run in both directions.

Source: *Language and Society*, Vol. 15, 1985, p. 4-9.

[10] D'Iberville Fortier, *op. cit.*, p. 1.