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**“Official Languages in Canada and  
the Language Professions: Tools for Dialogue”**

Notes for the Keynote Address  
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Terminology and Interpretation in Canada and Cuba

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Señoras y Señores, Mesdames et Messieurs, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank the organizers of this symposium for having invited me to speak here.

As well, I am happy to see that the agenda of this symposium covers one of the most interesting aspects of linguistic planning policy.

## **Introduction**

Since its very beginning, Canada faced the need to function in many languages. The first relations between Europeans and our First Nations were established thanks to the services of interpreters. Afterwards, many communications between the British and the French also relied on interpretation and translation.

Due largely to of successive waves of immigration, Canadians today speak over 100 languages, including more than 50 Native ones,<sup>1</sup>. Although English and French are our two official languages, Native languages also have official status in some territories. Today, almost 20% of Canada's population was born outside Canada, and one out of six people have a language other than English or French for their mother tongue.

Nevertheless, most Canadians speak English or French at home. French is the mother tongue of 23% of Canadians, and of more than four out of five Quebecers. What this means is that in Canada, the profession of translator – perhaps the world's second oldest profession – has become an essential job by force of circumstance.

The coexistence of English and French – and the institutional and individual bilingualism derived from it – is an essential feature of today's Canada. This linguistic duality defines our identity and guides our future. Like snow, maple syrup or hockey, it makes us what we are. A recent survey revealed that 77% of Canadians support bilingualism.<sup>2</sup>

Since the passage of the first *Official Languages Act* in 1969 and the inclusion of language rights in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, language professions began to grow and have never stopped doing so.

Indeed, the contribution of language professions to the implementation of Canada's linguistic framework is crucial. To situate it properly, I will first tell you about the Canadian official languages project. Then I will deal with the issue of the impact of our language system on the role of translators, interpreters and terminologists and on the development of language industries.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, 2001 Census.

<sup>2</sup> See Centre for Research and Information on Canada surveys (<http://www.cric.ca>).

## 1. The Official Languages Project

As Commissioner of Official Languages, my mission – which I see as a privilege – is to act as the linguistic conscience of my fellow Canadians. As an ombudsman, I defend an inclusive vision of Canada, and I promote harmonious ways of living together.

This contributes to progressively achieving real equality for both our official languages: equality based on respect for and appreciation of our linguistic and cultural wealth. Our federal institutions must strive to create this ideal country, and ensure that the promotion of our official languages frames and provides orientation to our increasing diversity.

In Canada, translators, interpreters and terminologists are well aware that they are crafting a multicultural and bilingual society. To paraphrase the beautiful words of French philosopher Paul Ricœur, they know that “to translate is to mediate between the plurality of cultures and the unity of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

The Canadian linguistic framework has three major objectives:

- to allow all Canadians to enjoy equal opportunities for participation in the political, economic, social and cultural life of our country;
- to ensure that essential public services are provided in both official languages; and
- to make it possible for all citizens to develop and flourish in either official language, finding respect for their culture and heritage.

In practice, federal government bilingualism depends first and foremost on the effective and equitable use of English and French in government departments and agencies. This *institutional* bilingualism is what enables citizens of both language communities to live in their own language.

By ensuring the best possible communication between government and private citizens, language professions are one of the essential components of modern governance. They participate in keeping the promise the Government of Canada makes in the *Official Languages Act* to encourage the development of English- and French-speaking minorities and to strengthen Canada’s bilingual identity on a national scale. On the international level, they contribute to showcasing Canada’s linguistic duality.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, « Cultures, du deuil à la traduction » (Cultures, from mourning to translation). *Le Monde*, May 24, 2004. [http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche\\_articleweb/1,13-0,36-365998,0.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche_articleweb/1,13-0,36-365998,0.html). Visited on November 18, 2004.

## **2. Translators, terminologists and interpreters and their key roles**

Now let us see what this means in practice.

It is clear that the *Official Languages Act* explicitly describes:

- a bilingual Parliament;
- bilingual federal courts and criminal procedures;
- the right of citizens to receive services from the federal government in English or French where numbers warrant;
- the right of federal employees to work in the official language of their choice in designated regions;
- equitable participation of Anglophones and Francophones in federal institutions regardless of their ethnic or linguistic origin;
- the federal government's commitment to promote English and French in Canadian society and to enhance the vitality of official language minority communities; and
- linguistic duality in Canada's activities abroad and in its international relations.

Providing simultaneous interpretation of Parliamentary debates and discussions, translating reports, proceedings, laws and court decisions as well as all the ordinary texts addressed to the public or to public servants, as you will understand, is no small task. However, this is the price of respect and fairness.

This is why language specialists in particular are at the centre of protection for individual rights in legal procedures, where people have the right to be heard and stand trial in their own language.

On that front, I must point out that Canada has developed an international reputation for its dual legal system and legal bilingualism.

There are centres of legal expertise at McGill University, the University of Moncton, the University of Ottawa and the Collège de Saint-Boniface, for the proper translation of expressions used in Common Law or Civil Law. In fact, Canadians were the first to "Frenchify" Common Law.

It should be recalled, in passing, that all laws passed by Parliament and all accompanying regulations must not only be translated but published at the same time in both official languages, and that either version of these documents is equally valid. Often, both versions are drafted at the same time, which avoids having one that is a translation of the other. Quite a challenge for a language specialist!

Obviously, clever lawyers will always choose the wording they believe will favour their client the most.

### 3. Impact of bilingual policy on the language professions

Over the past decade, in Canada and abroad, the phenomena linked to globalization and new communications technologies were a boon for terminologists and translators.

Some would call it a headache instead, since it presents such complex and varied challenges. Let us mention, for one, the phenomenal advance in the digitization of documents on the Internet, which leads to an equally phenomenal increase in demand for translation services. Also, the increasing membership of the European Community and new international trade agreements call for increasingly diverse, tailor-made translation and interpretation services that can respond quickly to demands. We hope emerging technologies such as machine translation and delocalization of labour will help us face these challenges. There are many of them, but Canada and its community of translators and interpreters intend to respond to them fully.

In the past, Canada rose to major challenges for translation and interpretation. Even before the *Official Languages Act* was passed, Canada supported the development of language professions and created the Translation Bureau, which is still a world leader in the field.

With 1,750 employees, including 1,150 translators, interpreters and terminologists all over Canada, the Translation Bureau today provides a full range of language products and services, either interpretation, translation or multilingual services. In comparison, I should point out that the European Union today employs some 2,000 translators, 500 for Parliament, without counting interpreters.<sup>4</sup>

Most insiders are familiar with the Translation Bureau's excellent TERMIUM database, which can also be consulted in Spanish. TERMIUM has 3.5 million entries for translation, terminology and official titles. Since 1997, thanks to the Internet, both language professionals and all employees of the Government of Canada have access to TERMIUM. Customers outside the public service can also subscribe.

There are also teams of translators and interpreters in many provincial government administrations, especially in Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and Manitoba. These provincial governments provide a broad range of services in English and French, pass laws in both languages and have court systems that operate in both languages.

Finally, Industry Canada estimates there are some 15,000 self-employed workers in language industries.<sup>5</sup> The market value of language teaching and translation in Canada is estimated at \$750 million.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Le Saux, Annie. « Les enjeux de la traduction en Europe » (Challenges for translation in Europe). In *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France (French Libraries Newsletter)*, Vol. 48, No. 5. Paris: 2003, p. 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, *The Next Act: New Momentum for Canada's Linguistic Duality. Action Plan for Official Languages*. Ottawa: Privy Council Office, March 2003, p. 61.  
[http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/aia/default.asp?Language=E&Page=ActionPlan&doc=ActionPlan/cover\\_e.htm](http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/aia/default.asp?Language=E&Page=ActionPlan&doc=ActionPlan/cover_e.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Les Affaires, *Cahier spécial*, September 6, 2003.

Mindful of the fragmentation of language industries and the need to invest in research and development for new technologies, the Government of Canada recently provided \$10 million over five years to establish a Language Technologies Research Centre. The Centre will employ 15 people, ten of them researchers.

The natural language processing activities of the National Research Council of Canada's Information Technology Institute will be one research focus for the Centre. It also is in close contact with many partners, including Industry Canada and the Language Industry Association/Association de l'industrie de la langue (AILIA), to respond to the technical and immediate challenges for the sector.

But the Government of Canada's support for translation and interpretation does not stop there. In order to make participation in Canada's public life possible for members of both linguistic communities, the Department of Canadian Heritage provides grants<sup>7</sup> to non-profit organizations for simultaneous interpretation at major meetings, or for the translation of key documents.

For some years now, the political will to promote our two official languages has clearly resonated in the world of business. Many Canadian companies go well beyond compulsory minimums for bilingual labelling and provide a range of printed material and many services both in English and French. For example, Mountain Equipment Co-op recently made considerable improvements to its language practices to provide better service to its French-speaking clientele. They even published a lexicon of terms for the products they offer. Not just customers benefit from such efforts – so do the language professions.

However, globalization raises challenges, especially that of making full use of the advantages of globalization while keeping our language and cultural diversity intact. Countries where Spanish, French and threatened languages are spoken must be aware that they are the keepers of this diversity, and make sure that our children and grandchildren can continue to enjoy this legacy.

## **Conclusion**

In Canada today, as in many countries, to speak of language professions is to defend diversity. When we mention translation and interpretation, we ensure dialogue between cultures. We can then say that interpreters, translators and terminologists are the Blue Berets of language, guardians of the world's diversity.

In short, without perhaps even knowing it, you are the foot soldiers of an army toiling in the shadows in order to open spaces for peoples to meet and communicate. You encourage the development of a constructive communication that recognizes a plurality of identities.

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<sup>7</sup> Canadian Heritage, *Guide for Canadian Heritage Financial Support Programs*, spring 2004, p. 71.

When you think about it, each one of us does the same job in our own way. We are mediators. Little by little, we lead our fellow citizens to a greater awareness of their historic, cultural and artistic heritage while opening their eyes to the world. Your job does not receive enough recognition and deserves to be acknowledged more often. I salute you.

Thank you.