

There is no single, ideal translation of any text at any moment in history

Given that everything in Quebec (Québec?) is political, from street names to education policy by way of when to include accented letters, French-to-English translators cannot afford to ignore how their work is received by those who pay for it. There is no single, ideal translation of any text at any moment in history, merely some correct ones that better fulfill their purpose than others. Translators everywhere have to satisfy that two-headed monster: the buyer and the reader. What makes translating French into English in Quebec especially challenging is that the translation has to satisfy both native speakers and those who are not, but, because they may know the

subject matter better than most native speakers, also imagine they know the language better. I am infinitely grateful to the clients who read my translations and ask why something has been expressed in a way they would not have expected—and somewhat less grateful to those (fortunately far fewer) who expect a mirror image of the original, down to expecting the same number of occurrences for a word in both languages, if the translation is to be “faithful and accurate.”

This probably does not mean that we should adopt Anglo-Saxon attitudes in dress, alliterative poetry and burial practices—but I nevertheless think we should persist in the application of the virtues that this special use of “Anglo-Saxon” refers to: pragmatism, succinctness and modesty. ☺

Going for Bloke in Quebec

There used to be a time when English translators came to Quebec and French translators went to other provinces. In fact, it seemed like my whole 1980 graduating class left for Ontario. The only person who stayed behind was, I believe, the sole other graduating Anglophone. I wanted to stay, too, but personal circumstances took me back to my home town of Toronto, so I was out of luck. As an Anglophone I had no hope of working there as a translator. Employers wanted Francophones.

The Internet age has made English translators a much smaller minority

So for Anglos, the job opportunities were in Quebec City and Montreal, and for Francos, they were in Ottawa and Toronto, and a bit in New Brunswick and Manitoba. French translators could hope to land a job someday back in Quebec, but they had to be very good because competition was fierce.

That has all changed. Now that we can work wherever we want, Anglophones do not have to come here anymore, and Francophones do not have to leave. Even in Quebec City, the place where everything is already in French, the great majority of translators work into French.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. As an agency owner who, over the years, has sought to recruit Anglophones and bring them to Quebec City, I have noticed that many prefer not to come. They speak and write French, but for them French-speaking Quebec is *chez les autres*, and they would prefer to stay *chez eux*. It is a phenomenon that has kept Quebec a French-speaking place over the years and the rest of Canada English-speaking.

Even so, English translators are more of a minority than one would guess

The equation “Quebec into English/other provinces into French” doesn’t really hold up when we look at what actually gets translated in this country. Quebec is about 22% of Canada’s population, but French-to-English translation is far less than 22% of the total.

The obvious cause is the federal government, which provides a cornucopia of work into French, but very little into English. Why? Because English is the language of the workplace in Ottawa, and French is the language of translation.

Quite aside from whether this is scandalous or disheartening or simply a fact of life, it has made Canada a leader in French translation and provided great employment opportunities for Francophone translators in Quebec. At the same time, it has kept a lid on the number of English translators in the country and within Quebec.

Being a minority is not such a bad thing

There is an upside to less government work into English. It means that translators usually get to work on important stuff. Nothing gets translated out of habit or obligation—managers have to budget for and defend the expense, so it has to be necessary. This is particularly true at the Quebec provincial level, where English is not an official language.

A side benefit is that the work has greater perceived value. Clients attach a lot of importance to the

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Being an English translator in Quebec is very much like being a French translator. Or so I thought when Circuit first asked me to reflect on the subject. The differences are not huge. But differences do exist that alter the working day in subtle ways. Let’s examine a few.

By Grant Hamilton, C. Tr.



Websites, brochures, user guides, speeches, press releases, and other materials that they have translated into English, and so they are willing to pay more for it. Perhaps this explains why word rates are essentially the same from French into English, despite the 10% to 15% additional words that French texts usually contain.

Another benefit of less government work into English is variety—a good 70% of the available work comes from private clients. This means that students embarking on their careers are just as likely to work in banking, insurance, marketing, or some other business field as they are to work for the government; they have more choice. Variety also appeals to generalists like me who like to switch between subject matter.

Client profiles are different in the French-to-English market

Clients who purchase English translations in Quebec are usually Francophones with a good command of English. This has several consequences:

- Clients may overestimate their command of English and cause problems with their edits.
- Clients may actually forbid the use of perfectly legitimate words—like job, switch, or check—due to semantic interference from *joual* (“Please use a nicer word!”).
- Translators are more likely to be praised for good work, because their clients can actually recognize it.
- Translators who do bad work have trouble holding on to clients, because people know right away that the quality is poor.

For obvious reasons, this type of client is more prevalent in the Montreal area, where the business community has an almost universal command of English. Unilingual Francophones, a much smaller group, tend to cluster in Quebec City and the civil service, which explains the poor quality of English that occasionally makes its way into government communications.

The purchasers of French translation present a very different profile. They fall mainly into two diametrically opposed categories: native speakers of French and people with no knowledge whatsoever of French. The former can be very critical of the French translations they receive, without realizing that they are in fact taking issue with the content of the English. The latter have no idea whether the French is good unless someone tells them. Their biggest concern is how fast you translate—doing things in French is usually a nuisance for them, so they just want it over with as quickly as possible.

Educational opportunities for English translators are getting better

Back in the linguistic mists of time, there was not much need for English translators in Quebec. There were some at the National Assembly and throughout the government, but the business realm was firmly in Anglo hands and had no need of English translation. There were not even any real courses of study you could take to learn the profession.

Now university programs tailored to Anglophones exist in Quebec, developed in response to new market requirements. As economic power shifted in past decades, entire industries came to function wholly in French. And as the use of French in the workplace rose, so did the need for English translation.

One example is the advertising industry. The overwhelming language of the workplace is French, and not just any French, but very idiomatic, colloquial, and (despite impressions to the contrary) well-written French. This has acted as an entry barrier to Anglophones, who despite their increased fluency cannot function in French at the very high levels that advertising demands. At the same time, it has opened the door to English translators who are comfortable working with promotional texts for public consumption.

Linguistically talented Anglophones are much more likely to work in their own language as copywriters or journalists than they are to become translators. It’s a matter of supply and demand, and possibly the historical lack of second-language skills among Anglophones. But at least today, those who do turn to translation have opportunities to train in the field.

The future of English translation in Quebec is bright

If the French texts we receive at the office are any indication, French has a long and bright future in Quebec, and so does English translation. The written work of Francophone Quebecers is at least of equal quality, and often better quality, than the English texts we receive from Anglophones. It is lively and spontaneous, and can be hard to translate into English because it remains so faithful to the essence of French.

I know it is easy to be pessimistic about the state of French in Quebec—Montreal seems more and more English each passing day... Anglicisms litter the spoken word... college students struggle to write proper French... But the documentary evidence shows that there are many reasons to be optimistic, too. English remains an add-on, an afterthought, a language that more people speak and understand but that very few truly master. Quebecers still live and breathe French. And they will need professional translators for many years to come to share their voice with the world. ☞

