



Translation in Canada

By Grant Hamilton

In many ways, Canada looks and feels like America. It has big, sprawling cities, sports stadiums, shopping malls, and the same unmistakable sense of space and newness found throughout the U.S. But when it comes to translation, it is a whole different world. The reason is simple: Canada has two official languages, English and French.

Why does that make a difference? Imagine for a second if Spanish were the main language of the six New England states, plus New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, the District of Columbia, and both Virginia and West Virginia. Imagine further if English remained the main language in all other states. That would make the U.S. about as Spanish as Canada is French. If this were the case, do you think U.S. businesses would continue to operate in English only? Would restaurants in Boston translate their menus for tourists from the southern and western states? What about the federal government?

When one-quarter of the entire population speaks a minority language and is geographically concentrated in a single area, everything must be translated: government documents, public signs, court decisions, product packaging, advertising—everything!

A Bilingual Country Full of Unilingual People

Surprisingly few Canadians actually speak both English and French. In fact, 7 of the 10 provinces are so massively English, you could go days or weeks without hearing a word of French.

Consider this: Canada's easternmost province, Newfoundland and Labrador, is home to about half a million people. In the 2006 census, 494,345 of them claimed to speak

only English at home, versus 650 who claimed to speak only French. About 4.7% of the province's residents said they were fluent in French. In Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia, 3,341,285 listed English as their home language versus only 15,325 who listed French. In fact, for every person who spoke French at home, more than 41 spoke a nonofficial language such as Cantonese or Punjabi. About 5.2% of British Columbians claimed to be fluent in French.

The picture is completely different in Canada's only majority French province, Quebec. There, slightly more than 6 million people out of a total population of about 7.5 million speak French at home, compared to some 745,000 who use English and 520,000 who speak a third language.

English, as the language of money, power, and international trade, is widely spoken by francophone Quebecers, who have the advantage of living in close proximity to English Canada and the U.S. In cosmopolitan Montreal, home to a huge immigrant population, many people are in fact trilingual, speaking Portuguese, Chinese, or other languages at home, and English and French in public and at work. Even so, over four million Quebecers speak no English whatsoever.

In Quebec City, where I live, 95.3% of residents are native French speakers and two-thirds are unilingual. Native English speakers represent less than 1.5% of the total population and are actually outnumbered by third language groups, who represent 2.8% of the population. The remaining 0.4% claim both English and French as mother tongues. Overall, only 18% of Canadians claim to be fluent in both English and French, most of them francophones.¹

A Land of Translation

These demographic realities have made Canada a worldwide leader in translation. Although it has only 0.5% of the world population, it occupies fully 10% of the global translation market.²

The biggest employer of translators is the federal government. Its Translation Bureau has 1,200 salaried translators, interpreters, terminologists, and localization specialists. Not only do these professionals translate reams of documents, mostly from English into French, but they also provide an array of other language services, such as Termium, the Canadian government's free trilingual (English, French, Spanish) terminology data-bank covering virtually all areas of human activity. The Translation Bureau is also a regular source of work for hundreds of freelancers.

The provincial governments also translate, but to widely varying extents. Only one province, New Brunswick, is officially bilingual, a political decision subsequently entrenched in the constitution. It now has a legal obligation to translate everything it does for the benefit of its one-third French-speaking population. Manitoba must also translate all laws into French and provide guaranteed levels of French-language education according to a 1985 Supreme Court ruling.³

The most populous province, Ontario, although not officially bilingual, makes extensive use of translation. Its *French Language Services Act* requires it to provide government services in French in 25 designated areas (non-urban areas where francophones represent at least 10% of the population and urban centers with at least 5,000 francophones).⁴ Ontario has nearly 500,000 native French speakers out of a total population of

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about 12 million, most clustered in the federal capital of Ottawa or close to the Quebec border.

Quebec is the only province that is officially unilingual (in its case, unilingual French). Its *Charter of the French Language*, intended as a bulwark against the encroachment of English, requires businesses to operate in French and deal with the government in French, and requires non-Canadian citizens (such as immigrants from the U.S.) to send their children to French-language schools.⁵ The designation does not, however, apply to the courts or to individual citizens in their private dealings with the government.

What It Means for Translators

The most glaring difference between the translation industry in the U.S. and Canada is the opportunity for salaried employment. In addition to the thousands on the Canadian government's payroll, many thousands more work for private employers. Big banks like the Royal Bank or the Bank of Montreal have substantial in-house translation departments. Translators work for chartered accountancies, airlines, grocery store chains, big retailers, telecoms, law firms, and many other employers. In fact, students graduating from translation programs are three times more likely to start their careers in salaried positions than as freelancers.⁶

This pays huge dividends in terms of professional development. Most

young translators get daily feedback on their work from senior editors (often called revisers in Canada), who are themselves translators. This ongoing interaction boosts their self-confidence and the quality of their work. According to studies, salaried translators in Canada earn more on average than freelance translators, and among freelance translators, those who worked first as salaried translators earn more on average than those who did not.⁷

Another difference—of particular benefit to freelancers—is the generalized need for translation in Canada. Since everybody who does business in the country is a potential client, most freelancers can cultivate business contacts and direct clients among people in their families and social circles. It is also easier for them to cold-call potential clients or grow their clientele by attending local business functions. Many freelancers never work for agencies. There are estimated to be 15,000 translators, interpreters, terminologists, and localization specialists in Canada.

What It Means for Translation Agencies

A striking difference among Canadian translation agencies is their use of in-house translators. When every day brings guaranteed work in a single language pair, it is more cost-effective and better for quality control to have an in-house team. My ➡

own agency has 20 in-house translators, and some of the bigger names have hundreds. Many large translation companies in the U.S. have none at all.

In addition, the quality control step tends to be more codified. For example, all editing work at Canadian agencies is performed by senior translators. It is not considered acceptable to use non-translators for the task, even if they are native speakers of the target language. A big reason for this is the intense competition on the basis of quality. The Canadian translation market is mature and has many savvy buyers who expect, demand, and recognize high quality. Subpar work is not tolerated. Even “acceptable” quality work is a difficult sell when clients expect outstanding.

Professional Organizations

There is no single translators association in Canada similar to ATA. A national organization exists for agencies and language schools called AILIA. It is a voice for the business interests of the Canadian language industry. A second national body, the Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council (CTTIC), is a federation of nine provincial and territorial organizations. One of CTTIC’s main activities has been to implement standard certification procedures, in accordance with its objective to provide uniform standards for the profession and to ensure the competence of the members of the organizations it represents. CTTIC handles translator certification in all parts of the country except Quebec. It has also recently received government funding to improve professional training for translators across the country. In addition to AILIA and CTTIC, translators and interpreters have individual associations in each province. These asso-

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ciations are similar to ATA, but without corporate members. They hold regular conferences and provide training opportunities.

The Quebec association, the Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec (OTTIAQ), is unique in that it is a recognized professional order whose primary mission is to protect the public against bad translations. It is similar in many ways to associations of registered nurses or chartered accountants or engineers. It has the right to inspect a translator’s professional practice and can order a translator to take remedial training if it deems this necessary. Only certified translators may belong to OTTIAQ, and only OTTIAQ members may call themselves certified. There is no certification exam per se, but rather a rigorous process designed to recognize proven ability and experience. To be an OTTIAQ member, you must have a university degree in translation and, depending on how many years of work experience you possess, perform a mentorship under the supervision of a certified translator or submit a corpus of translations for evaluation by a committee. If you do not have a university degree, you may also request certification by proving that you have worked for five years or more as a full-time translator and by submitting a corpus of translations. All told, there are more than 2,000 members of OTTIAQ.

Can You Work for Canadian Clients?

Of course you can! If you are a talented translator who works between English and French, there are probably opportunities for you in Canada. The greatest volume of work is into French, which for some texts requires familiarity with Canadian French. If you want to investigate this option, I would suggest teaming up with a Canadian freelance partner so that your work is edited and you get feedback; this is a particularly good arrangement if you wish to bypass agencies and work for direct clients. Work is also available into English, mostly in Quebec.

With globalization, there is also considerable new demand for translation into Spanish. You may be able to generate work in this area by having a network of translator colleagues in Canada who can refer their Spanish jobs to you, or by courting work from boutique agencies. I know from my own experience that it is not always easy to find French-Spanish translators for the Quebec market.

Whatever you do, bear in mind that Canada is a very demanding market. It expects quality and will go out of its way to obtain it. Offer quality, and clients will be beating a path to your door, wherever it may be.

Notes

1. All figures are drawn from Canada's 2006 Census, www.statcan.gc.ca.
2. These figures come from two sources: Common Sense Advisory's estimated size of the global translation market and Statistics Canada's figures on population and the domestic translation industry. About a decade ago, the global market was estimated to be \$12 billion and Canada's domestic industry \$1.2 billion. Indications are that the global market has doubled in size since then to \$25 billion, but it is conceivable that the domestic Canadian market has also doubled. Canada is a prosperous first world country where the demand for translation has skyrocketed with the advent of globalization.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reference_re_Manitoba_Language_Rights and www.canlii.org/en/ca/scc/doc/1985/1985canlii33/1985canlii33.html
4. www.ofa.gov.on.ca/en/flsa.html
5. www.olf.gouv.qc.ca/english/charter/index.html
6. Study of Language Industry Career Paths (Association de l'industrie de la langue, June 2007).
7. Idem.

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Association of Translators and Interpreters of Alberta

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Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario

www.atio.on.ca

Association of Translators and Interpreters of Saskatchewan

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Association of Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters of Manitoba

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Association de l'industrie de la langue

www.ailla.ca

Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council

www.cttic.org

Corporation of Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters of New Brunswick

www.ctinb.nb.ca

Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec

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Society of Translators and Interpreters of British Columbia

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