

OFFICIAL BILINGUALISM: FAIR EXCHANGE?

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Official bilingualism in Canada is a noble ideal. It is also a successful reality within the limits of its mandate: to ensure that the government and governmental services speak two languages to its citizens. Official bilingualism gives us moral high ground: our southern neighbours, who are as multilingual as we are, see no advantage in giving legal rights or national recognition to Spanish. It also gives us international prestige: Canada has developed a massive and well-oiled translation machine that is admired worldwide. Translators are rarely given the credit they deserve and official bilingualism relies much more than most realize on the hidden work of translation. Training and research in the burgeoning field of Translation Studies and Terminology have put Canada on the map for specialists all around the world.

But any feelings of collective self-satisfaction should be tempered by the realities on the ground. Bilingualism is a very partial recognition of the differences in Canadian society. It privileges a single axis of Canadian identity, and largely neglects First Nations' languages and all the languages of immigration. While we are aware of what bilingualism allows Canadian society to do, we are less conscious of the limits it imposes, what it stops us from doing. How could the kinds of success that official

bilingualism has given French in Canada be extended to other important constituencies of Canadian society? This is a legitimate and pressing question.

Equally importantly, though official bilingualism aims to guarantee legal equality between French and English, it functions through profound inequality. Official bilingualism helps to perpetuate a fictional idea of language relations—the fiction of symmetry that we see on cereal boxes and government brochures, the mirror-image paragraphs that show English and French as absolutely equal. The truth is that 90% of government translation goes from English into French. This means that most ideas and policies are conceived in English, then brought over into French. And so there has been an unevenness at the heart of official bilingualism from the start –a lack of symmetry that helps explain why Anglophones and Francophones have differing perceptions of bilingualism. For a strong and confident language, translation is an act of generosity and inclusion. For a fragile language, translation can be threatening: the weaker language becomes a repository of realities generated in another milieu. And a long tradition of mediocre translation—now largely corrected-- instilled a suspicion of translation in Francophone culture. Official bilingualism carries a baggage of inequality beneath the scrupulously doubled surfaces of government documents, web pages, labels and notices.

Official bilingualism should not deceive us into thinking that we are multilingual and therefore open to the world. In the field of literary translation, for instance, we need to be much more open to other languages and to widen the application of our

considerable expertise. Canadians have become skilled in translating to each other. Canadian literary translation since the 1970s has created entire libraries of literature in the other language. First there was a great wave of translation from French into English, now there is an equally important movement from English into French. Canadian translations are now published in New York and in Paris, no longer considered purely local products. Here again, Canadians are admired for the quantity and quality of work that is produced--for the prominence that some of our translators have achieved, the honours they have received, the support they are given by publishers and government programs. But paradoxically, 'our' two languages can close us off from the world, confining the great mass of literary translation work to the Canadian scene. Canadian translators should also see themselves as translators of the world—as open to French and Francophone literature as Quebec writing, as open to the Spanish of Latin America and the Arabic of North Africa.

We need to be open to the changing nature of language interactions in everyday life. Bilingualism is never symmetrical: for individual as for cities, transactions between languages never come out exactly even. Montreal is not a bilingual city, if by that is suggested an idea of fair and symmetrical exchange. Montreal today is a francophone city where English and French enter into a conversation whose terms are continually changing. What is changing most is the status of English. Less and less the language of a historically rooted community, English is increasingly a diverse, international language spoken by locals and newcomers. It is no longer

possible to use the label Anglophone—or Francophone—with total confidence. The lawyer and human rights activist Julius Grey writes that he doesn't consider himself an Anglophone but 'un Québécois qui parle français et anglais'. The community which once claimed to speak with one voice in provincial politics no longer makes such a claim. The Anglophone community is now much too diverse and too intermingled with the Francophone community to define itself as one unit. Mixed marriages, mixed neighbourhoods, are generating new idioms, some of them indeed 'mixed up'. But the dangers of too much contact seem minor compared to the damage inflicted by separation.

To recognize the profoundly different cultural forces that meet through practices of translation in Canada does not mean, however, that official bilingualism should be scrapped. Au contraire. The Harper administration is looking for ways to dismantle the public institutions that have been so important to Canadians over the years—the railways, the CBC, arts funding, and the list goes on. Canada needs the Official Languages Act—while recognizing its limitations. And so we must renew our commitment to institutional bilingualism and oppose the constant erosion of government support for programs and offices like the Translation Bureau. The Federal government relies increasingly on outsourcing for translation and has largely withdrawn from training activities. While most translators were once

employed in the public sector, today only 17% of the 15,000 translators are public sector employees.¹

Official bilingualism is necessary. Necessary but not sufficient. It is one way in which Canadian reality is expressed, and this way has become essential to the integration of Quebec within the Canadian federation. Official bilingualism should be defended not as an expression of a superior humanistic culture or as a form of altruism, but as a strategic recognition of Quebec national identity and a now fully integrated understanding of citizenship.

Bilingual *and* multicultural? Canada's two cultural policies seem to belong to parallel universes. Any assessment of official bilingualism must recognize the real tensions between these different visions of the country, as well as the constituencies they both ignore. But while official bilingualism can be criticized for proposing a façade of equality where none exists, it must be defended against the current government's undermining of public institutions.

¹ <http://www.bt-tb.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/publications/documents/rapport-report-benchmarking-eng.pdf> *Translation Bureau Benchmarking and Comparative Analysis* May 15 2012.