

Parliamentary Translation in New Brunswick: An Inside Look

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Introduction

In the early seventies, I visited the former U.S.S.R. as part of two-week student tour. This was back in the days of the Iron Curtain and the cold war. Armed guards would prevent tourists from entering restricted areas. On the train, our cameras were at times confiscated. We actually found listening devices in two hotels.

Our itinerary was rigid. We were on our way to yet another museum. At a traffic light in Moscow, we spotted a university campus and asked whether we could visit. Our Russian guide explained that we could not deviate from our itinerary. We protested. The driver pulled the bus to the side and shut off the engine. This was in late December. In no time, the windows started fogging up due to the frigid temperature, but we did not relent.

After half an hour, the Russian guide, a little taken aback by our brazenness, suggested a compromise. We would handle the matter in a democratic way, by selecting from our ranks one man and one woman who would accompany her to seek permission to visit the campus. The guide only spoke French as a second language. Group members spoke a range of languages, but not Russian. We relayed the message to one another as best we could. The bus headed toward the campus. The guide, along with the two delegates, went inside and returned after a few minutes. Sorry, she said, but there is an epidemic on campus, and no visitors are allowed. So, we proceeded to the next museum.

The following day, a friend and I were approached by a young man in Moscow bar. Through her rudimentary Polish and my rudimentary German, we learned that he was a university student in Moscow. We asked how bad the epidemic was on campus. His reply: What epidemic?

From this episode, I learned two lessons: how powerless people are when they cannot understand what is happening around them and how crucial language is for genuine democracy. This is also what led me, after a few detours, to a career in parliamentary translation.

I wish to thank our president, Alain Otis, for his kind invitation. We will begin with an overview of the history and mandate of parliamentary translation in New Brunswick. We will then review work conditions. Finally, we will look at 10 golden rules in parliamentary translation.

History

Our elected officials in New Brunswick recognized the importance of translation for democracy by passing the *Official Languages Act*, which received royal assent on April 18, 1969, five months before the federal Act. Administrative translation dates back to August 1967, with the creation of the Translation Bureau in the Department of Supply and Services. Simultaneous translation began at the Legislative Assembly about that time. Legislative translation can be traced back to the *Revised Statutes of New Brunswick*, released in 1973 in both official languages.

On July 1, 1977, with proclamation of section 4 of the *Official Languages Act*, parliamentary translation arrived on the scene, when a Debates Section was created at the Translation Bureau. The Debates Section was transferred to the Legislative Assembly in 1982 and renamed Debates Translation in 1984. In 1994, the Hansard and translation services were combined into a single division, Hansard and Debates Translation. In 1997, after some reforms, this unit was split back into the current setup: the Hansard Office and Debates Translation.

Mandate

The *Official Languages Act* requires that the records and journals of the Legislative Assembly be printed and published in both official languages. New Brunswick later had this requirement enshrined in the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

The main mandate is to translate the House proceedings (“Hansard”). In New Brunswick, contrary to the practice that later developed in other legislatures across Canada for publication of Hansard within 24 to 48 hours, the mandate has always been to complete translation of the proceedings before the next session.

Over the years, the mandate has evolved. At first, translation was limited to the throne speech and the budget speech, while oral questions were translated on a next-day basis. Hansard was translated by the next session and represented close to 90% of the workload. The Journal—in effect, the minutes of House—was also translated by the next session and accounted for 5% of the workload.

Later, other components were added:

- *Order and Notice Paper*. This daily agenda prepared for Members of the Legislative Assembly includes approximately 150 motions per session and accounts for 20% of the workload.
- Speeches and statements delivered in the House. These represent over 15% of the workload and are probably the translation service that our clients value the most.
- Press releases and correspondence. This translation, which accounts for 5% of the annual workload, is provided for the Office of Government Members, the Office of the Official Opposition, and the New Democratic Member’s Office.
- Office of the Legislative Assembly. Documents of a procedural or administrative nature are translated for the Speaker’s Office, the Clerk’s Office, and the Legislative Library. This represents approximately 5% of the annual workload.
- Committees. This involves meeting the translation needs of standing and select committees of the Legislative Assembly, such as agendas, briefs, and reports to the House. This represents 5% to 15% of the annual workload, depending on how active the committees are.

It is therefore obvious that demand has diversified and significantly increased. The average number of sitting days per session has more than doubled, from 30 to 70 days. Hansard now totals approximately 2.5 million words per session—roughly 25 volumes. Hansard translation was carried out by the next session from 1978 to 1992 but is now lagging behind.

Work Conditions

Debates Translation has two distinct work patterns: sessional and intersession.

The session typically runs three months, beginning in late November and ending in the spring. Each sitting day basically follows the same routine, with the most important items of business being statements by ministers, statements by members, oral questions, and introduction of bills. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, two hours are set aside for debate on private members' motions.

The parliamentary cycle starts with the throne speech, followed by a seven-day debate. Then comes the budget speech, also followed by a seven-day debate. The remainder of the session focuses on consideration of the budget estimates of the various government departments, which accounts for roughly half of the proceedings. Consideration of bills represents about one quarter of the proceedings, the final quarter being taken up by oral questions and debates on motions.

During the session, most of the work consists of translating statements and speeches before these are delivered in House. Why before? So that other members, the interpreters and the media may be provided with bilingual copies of the remarks when the member rises to speak.

The pace during the session is brisk, and deadlines are tight. Peak demand occurs in the early part of the session, when eight speeches—four by government members and four by opposition members—are given each day during the debates on the throne speech and the budget speech.

During each session, over 60 speeches are translated, averaging 15 pages each. Approximately 400 statements are also translated during each session. Roughly 75% of the work is done on behalf of ministers. Speeches and statements account for 15% of the annual workload.

During intersession, the bulk of the work relates to translation of Hansard. The daily proceedings are transcribed, translated, and then published in a set of volumes.

Let us take a closer look at how things work in the House. To have the floor, a member must attract the attention of the Chair. During the debates, the order of speakers is actually set in advance by House leaders from both sides, so that the Chair merely follows the list. When a member rises to speak, a console operator activates the microphone on the member's desk. Hence, members are only allowed to speak at their own desk. Members may use the official language of their choice. English is used approximately 75% of the time.

Digital recording uses four tracks: the floor (the language used by the member), English (simultaneous translation), French (simultaneous translation), and dubbing (speaker identification by the console operator). Remarks are taped in five-minute segments. Why five minutes? To facilitate timely transcribing by Hansard editors. Only those remarks spoken by the member who has the floor are transcribed. Interjections made by other members, although audible, are not transcribed as part of the record.

Once all the five-minute takes for a full sitting day are transcribed and edited by the Hansard staff, they are put together into what is referred to as a "daily", which is then printed and distributed to MLAs. These dailies, averaging 70 per session, are also sent to Debates Translation. For translation purposes, the work units are therefore five-minute takes that represent 600 to 700 words each. Upon completion of translation, the daily is returned to the Hansard Office, which sets up the original and the translation in side-by-side columns. Several dailies are then used to make up one volume. A session now represents close to 25 volumes.

To give you a glimpse of the constraints and parameters, I have prepared a list of 10 golden rules in parliamentary translation. These roughly follow the order of the 10 commandments.

1. You shall serve but one master at a time.

During the session, translation typically involves several speeches per day. A particular initiative, while put forward as the ultimate solution by the governing party, will be shot down as simplistic and unworkable by the opposition. Similarly, translation of the proceedings alternates between the two sides of a specific issue.

It becomes imperative to keep track at all times of who is being translated and to convey the message as convincingly as possible. Although this mental discipline calls for unflinching vigilance, one quickly accumulates a wealth of background information when the pros and cons of each issue are regularly debated.

2. You shall not use names in vain.

Parliamentary protocol requires that members not be called by name. They are to be referred to by title or riding. Thus, one refers to the Premier, the Opposition Leader, the House Leader, the Minister of Education, the Financial Critic or the member for Miramichi Bay. This extends to the use of names of private parties, who lack parliamentary privileges and are not in the House to defend themselves.

Indeed, members who refuse to recognize the authority of the Speaker may be named—called by name, in effect. This is a disciplinary action whereby the Speaker expels the offending member from the House for the remainder of the sitting day. Parliamentary translation must therefore avoid introducing any proper names that would render the remarks unparliamentary.

3. You shall remember deadlines.

Deadlines are unnegotiable. The opening day and budget day are announced to the public. It would be unthinkable to delay the opening of the Legislative Assembly because translation of the throne speech is not ready. Similarly, the budget speech cannot be postponed.

Translation is but one step in the preparation of speeches. Once translation of a minister's speech is completed, officials must prepare the reading copy and make photocopies (40 or so) in both official languages for distribution to MLAs and the media and for bilingual posting on the Web.

Missing a deadline for a minister's speech would render the translation pointless: yesterday's news is old news. To meet the tight deadlines, translation priorities follow the list of speakers. In case of conflict, priority is given, in descending order, to the Premier, the Opposition Leader, the House leaders, ministers, and critics. Therefore, one must translate quickly and efficiently.

4. You shall honour both genders.

Women have made their presence felt on the legislative scene in New Brunswick. They have held the positions of Lieutenant-Governor, Speaker of the House, Sergeant-at-Arms, Deputy Premier, Financial Critic, and leader of a political party. At the Legislative Assembly, women currently hold the senior positions of Clerk, Legislative Librarian, Hansard Editor, and Chief Translator. Parliamentary translation must therefore reflect a social reality where women represent a major portion of the electorate and officialdom.

The translations must reflect that fact that the positions of deputy ministers, directors, and heads of Crown corporations are no longer all filled by men. Research is required to ascertain the current officeholder.

Similarly, positions on municipal councils, on the boards of corporate entities and nonprofit organizations, as well as in the health and education systems are often held by women.

Finally, English translation will use more sparingly expressions such as teaching staff (instead of teacher), farming community (instead of farmers), school administration (instead of school principal), and Canadian population (instead of Canadians). Often, these longer expressions are simply attempts by French speakers to use gender-free language.

5. You shall not spill.

Due to tight deadlines, clients will often continue to bring changes once their speeches have been submitted for translation. Parliamentary documents such as the throne speech and the budget speech typically go through various drafts after translation has begun.

There arises the logistical problem of keeping track of all the changes and ensuring that none is overlooked. One can only imagine the glee of the opposition party or the media if they were privy to the various drafts and to last-minute budget adjustments and program additions or cutbacks.

Furthermore, a glimpse of the wording changes brought directly by ministers, the opposition, and their staff provides valuable insight into what is deemed “politically correct”. This training is acquired not at university or from books but through direct contact with people in public life.

6. You shall remain faithful.

In the Assembly, members must always address the Chair, not the Assembly, a specific individual or the gallery. This means using the third person: “Mr. Speaker, the minister is ill informed.” However, members quickly lapse into the second person. Thus, the Chair would not take offense at hearing: “Mr. Speaker, you do not know what you are talking about.” The comment would be directed at the minister. The translation must always retain the “spin” of the remarks.

Similarly, care will be taken to retain rhetorical redundancies, such as: “This year, the government has increased health care funding by \$1.5 billion. This year, the government has increased education funding by \$1 billion. This year, the government has lowered taxes.” The translation must not only convey the message accurately, it must also reproduce the impact and, sometimes, allow for applause.

7.

You shall not squander words.

In parliamentary translation, words are the medium of the message. And the words should not get in the way of the message. Conciseness must be valued.

A particular feature of parliamentary proceedings is simultaneous translation. People normally speak faster when reading than when talking off the cuff. The speaker who improvises must think before talking, which slows the delivery and facilitates the interpreter's task. People who simply read prepared remarks do not need to choose their words and, as a result, tend to talk faster. A well crafted and concise translation will assist interpreters in better synchronizing with the speaker.

An additional constraint is the fact that, out of courtesy, unilingual members may on occasion read a few lines phonetically in the other official language. This is where the translator's care to avoid tongue twisters or awkward phrasing will be appreciated. In other words, keep it simple.

8.

You shall not tell untruths.

Parliamentary tradition prohibits character attacks during proceedings. Any expression questioning the truthfulness of a member will be deemed unparliamentary. Therefore, "not to tell the whole truth", "to bend the truth", or "to play loose with the truth" should not be translated by the more concise "to lie", for this would defeat the efforts of the member who deliberately avoided the expression. Other expressions deemed unparliamentary include "idiot", "windbag", and "black sheep".

However, the Chair may let creative wording slip by. For instance, following a recent epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle, some opposition members could not resist claiming that government members were infected with "foot-in-mouth disease". A potentially incurable disease in humans, they would add.

9. You shall watch your language.

Members are entitled to use the language of their choice in the House. They may switch from one language to another, sometimes in mid-sentence. The translation will retain the member's own expressions in the other language. The member should sound the same in translation as in person. For instance, translation would retain "operational budget" as used by the member, although "operating budget" is more common. The transition should be seamless.

However, the process may also work in reverse: the spoken word is changed because of the translation. For example, "forgettable loan" inadvertently used by a member would be replaced by "forgivable loan" to match the terminology used in the translation.

Imagine that you are a unilingual person reading the proceedings of the House. A member switches to the other language, starting a sentence with "They". Whom is the member talking about? Parliamentary translation must ensure that paragraphs are self-standing, both grammatically and semantically. This means that the proper referent will be substituted, such as "government", "department", "the opposition", "the public", and so on. The person reading or hearing the remarks can then better grasp what is meant.

10. You shall standardize.

Each government has its own buzzwords. The Hatfield administration had its "thrusts". The McKenna government had its "agenda". The Lord administration has its "vision". The opposition accuses the government of using "creative accounting", resorting to "smoke and mirrors", and relying more on "spin doctors" than trying to recruit new doctors. And, of course, elected officials are always "concerned". Politicians must sound as much as politicians in translation as they do in person.

Standardization also means consistent use of terminology in translation. Thus, when the government prides itself on having mentioned "compassion" eight times in the throne speech and when the opposition points out that the speech merely contained two references to "tourism", the number of occurrences must apply in both languages.

Similarly, the translation should retain any repetition of numbers, amounts, dates, and proper names. This facilitates visual pinpointing and electronic search. It is even advisable not to restructure too much the initial sentence of paragraphs, in order to facilitate tracking by the speaker, the listener, the interpreters, and the reporters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that parliamentary translation plays a significant role in the exercise of democracy. It enables elected officials to communicate not only with each other in the House but also with their constituents.

Parliamentary translation requires constant monitoring of current events in the areas of politics, economics, culture, and terminology. Context is everything: knowing what is meant helps better understand what is said. Parliamentary translation must be both accurate and functional. When one puts words in a member's mouth, one must ensure that these words not only convey the proper meaning and impact but that they also flow smoothly and are readily understood.

Parliamentary translation is diversified because of the range of issues discussed, the alternating use of both official languages, and the presence of 55 MLAs and three political parties in the House. The style is diversified as well: ad lib oral remarks or more structured written speeches; long, uninterrupted speeches or the sparring of oral questions; puns and poetry; references to characters in movies or novels; quotes of a technical nature; humour, irony, couched insults, and sincere compliments. And all this with a financial and legal backdrop.

I enjoy parliamentary translation for several reasons. It involves a lifelong learning in various areas of expertise. It focuses on current events. It makes maximum use of one's language proficiency and writing skills. It requires absolute accuracy, conciseness, standardization, and creativity. It allows significant autonomy within a team environment. And, because the sessions are becoming longer, there is no shortage of work in sight. In short, I enjoy my work and urge young people to consider a career in parliamentary translation.

Mr. LeBlanc, a former Director of Hansard and Debates Translation, has been a parliamentary translator since 1975. For more information on the Legislative Assembly, visit <<http://www.gnb.ca/legis/index.asp>>.

