Journal des traducteurs
Translators' Journal

We eat Dandelions by the Root
If you Want to Advertise in French, you'd Better Know your Onions

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Volume 4, Number 1, 1er Trimestre 1959

La lexicographie au Canada

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061521ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1061521ar

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (print)
2562-2994 (digital)

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Cite this article

Trudeau, N. (1959). We eat Dandelions by the Root: If you Want to Advertise in French, you'd Better Know your Onions. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, *4*(1), 30–33. https://doi.org/10.7202/1061521ar

WE EAT DANDELIONS BY THE ROOT

or

IF YOU WANT TO ADVERTISE IN FRENCH, YOU'D BETTER KNOW YOUR ONIONS...[1]

Nolin TRUDEAU, Montréal

When you know only one language, you only have to think in that one language, to speak it and to write it. You only have one set of grammatical problems, syntax difficulties and style requirements.

But when you are bilingual, you double the number of words you have to know, and rules you have to follow.

The average unilingual Canadian has only a vague idea of how complicated it is to be bilingual, I mean fully bilingual. He seldom understands how difficult, unrewarding and dispiriting translation work can be.

As an example, if you took an average businessman into the woods, and asked him to identify insects, birds, trees, and plants, the chances are that outside of a hummingbird, a porcupine, a maple and a water lily, he could not name more than 10 per cent of the things he would see. Yet, the same man will turn over a booklet on our flora and fauna to a bilingual French-speaking Canadian, ask him to translate it, and express amazement that the man has to look in dictionaries (where he will not find more than 50 per cent of what he is looking for), write to Ottawa to get bilingual brochures on the subject, and ask him for a week in which to produce his French version of the English booklet.

¶ What's the French for Earwig ?

This happens every day in such widely different realms as geology, chemistry, cooking, fashion, agriculture, etc., etc. The unilingual person who knows his field by heart expects the bilingual man to be in turn a geologist, a chemist, a chef, a *grand couturier,* and a farmer. The fact is that in most areas, the translator is like the businessman in the woods. He can identify a bumble bee; a spruce perhaps, if he does not confuse it with a balsam fir; a moose; a pike, if he does not mistake it for small musky; but how about the tamarac (a tree), the nuthatch (a bird), the mad tom (a sort of catfish) and the earwig (a bug) ?

[1] Reprinted from *Canadian Broadcaster,* May 8, 1958.

Virtually all good English-to-French dictionaries are British and European. There are a startling number of North-American words that you will not find in these dictionaries (such as the bugs, trees, fish, plants, etc., which we have over here and which do not exist in Europe). Many English financial terms, legal expressions, medical words, and the like vary between the two continents. Yet the translator has to find the right term, the correct expression. The hunt for the proper words is often time-consuming.[2]

¶ French is more precise

French is a precise, highly articulate Latin language, English is, at times, a most conveniently vague medium of expression. In French, when you want to say something, you must state it clearly, and leave little to the reader's imagination. French is more difficult to write than English — good French that is. There are many reasons for this : more severe rules and regulations, a tougher grammar, a stricter syntax, objects which have a gender, difficult participles, and an exception to prove every rule.

¶ No French for smackeroo

French has only half as many words as English. In English, many liberties can be taken — especially in advertising copy; words can be invented, such as "swell-elegant", "crispy-crunch", "smackeroo", to suit the convenience of the writer. Not so in French. Such liberties only result in gibberish. The French do not approve of word inventors. They do a good job of preserving the words they have and of retaining their exact sense. Some "words", spelled exactly the same way in both languages, have different meanings ("versatile" in French means "inconstant"). A word may have a hundred meanings in English, only one or two in French.

French is, by and large, an active language, while English, generally, is passive. In French, "the man goes there"; in English, "the man is going there". In French, we say "one says that"; in English, "it is said". Translators who constantly retain the English passive form in French, produce copy which sounds more like English than French, and, is therefore, bad copy. The more French sounds like English, the poorer it is.

¶ Few literal translations

French is essentially different from English in more ways than one, and nowhere is this more evident than in proverbs and sayings. There is no way in French to link an advertisement showing a snooker table, with the expression : "Are you behind the 8-ball ?". We do keep our "sunny side up", but our fried eggs are "mirror eggs" — *œufs au miroir* — and have nothing to do with good humor. And when we have " a horse of a different color", we simply call it "another pair of sleeves".

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[2] See *Journal des Traducteurs*, III. 3 (1958) : 105-121.

In English, husbands and boy friends call their wives or girl friends "honey", but we say "my cabbage". This may sound ridiculous in English, but not any more than "honey" — *mon miel* — in French. "Poor as a church mouse" is "to be on the straw". "Not to beat around the bush", in French, is "not to go by four roads". When we take *French leave,* we say "English leave". Of a *game guy,* we say : "He's not cold in the eyes". And, finally, when we have passed away, we do not *push up daisies,* but "we eat dandelions by the roots". A thousand English proverbs and sayings — a thousand different ones in French.

There are about 1,000 French words in the English language. Yet many of them now differ from their original or present French meaning. "Connoisseur" is an example. It is an old French word; it is not even in the French dictionaries. In French, the word is "connaisseur", not "connoisseur", and it does not mean entirely the same thing. "Double entendre" which means "risqué" (both expressions are French) is made up of two French words, but it is not French. In French, we say "double sens" not "double entendre".

"Vaudeville", a French word, which comes from "vallée de Vire" first meant "a drinking song", then "a satirical song", then a "stage play with songs in it", then just a "light play". That is the meaning it still has in French. In English, "vaudeville" means a succession of unrelated items of entertainment, ranging from a juggler to a couple of ballroom dancers. In France they call it a "Music Hall" — two English words. In Quebec, the people use the word "vaudeville" in its English sense, thus committing an anglicism with a French word. The French word, for the English "Palais de danse", is "Dancing" (see Harrap's French-English Dictionary).

¶ Translating is frustrating

With all these complexities, it is easy to imagine what limitations and frustrations are encountered by the poor French copywriter when he is called upon to translate high pressure English copy, full of new, unusual words for which he frequently is at a loss to find proper equivalents.

There is a famous expression which one hears time and time again : "Ah ! You Frenchmen never agree on good French copy". The answer to this is that it is purely a matter of interpretation. Farm out a piece of copy to six translators. They will all make different versions, some good, some bad; all varying in form and style. This is understandable. Give a group of English persons, some writers, and others not, a subject to cover, supply them with the information, and let them at it. They too will come out with highly different versions, from plain mediocre to brilliant. Call in an English-speaking advertising copywriter and ask him to pass judgment on some copy you have in front of you, stating it was written by the sales manager and implying that you do not like it very much. You will get as thorough a blue-pencilling job as you are likely to see in a hundred years.

¶ Is it good French copy ?

How is it possible to obtain good translation ? The reply should be : "Proven ability, adequate compensation and sufficient time". Normally,

to be a good French translator, a man must first be a good French writer. He cannot be the one without being the other. A good translator in Canada must also know English perfectly. He must know the Canadian American English colloquialisms and expressions. He must know his Quebec market in order to avoid using French words which may have a pejorative connotation in Quebec, and so that he may choose from several correct French expressions, whichever is most prevalent in his province. He must preferably, therefore, be a part of the Quebec scene, live close to the people he is writing for, and be aware of the mentality and trends of his compatriots. In other words he should benefit from the stimulus of the public he serves. He should also, and this I believe is essential, work in co-operation with others, where mutual editing, polishing of sentences and close checking make for vastly improved and more accurate French copy.

¶ Dangerous assumptions

It is dangerous to assume that a man is a translator because he says he is one. His work may well be poor, and French advertising will suffer greatly in his hands.

It is a fallacy also to believe that every person who speaks French can write French sufficiently well to produce an adequate translation. Because the language is more difficult, there are fewer people who write it well in Canada than there are who write English properly. The great majority of French-speaking salesmen, or stenographers are not qualified to write French copy, and strangely enough, quite often their judgment on it is far from perfect. There are French Canadians who speak good French, but who have acquired most of their business experience in English. They write English much more than they do French. Hence, their ability to translate is highly limited. Asking them to do this kind of work places them in an embarrassing position.