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What our Parliamentary Orators Lose in Translation
In the French Hansard, a calorful debate can look pretty pale

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WHAT OUR PARLIAMENTARY ORATORS LOSE IN TRANSLATION*

In the French Hansard, a colorful debate can look pretty pale

Like most English-speaking Canadians, English-speaking MPs could hardly get along without the colloquial expressions that pepper almost everybody's conversation. But there are a dozen civil servants in Ottawa who wish they would try to. They're the 12 men and women who translate House of Commons debates each night, for publication of the French edition of Hansard the next morning.

Faced with a short deadline and an average flow of 30,000 words a day (90% of all words spoken in the Commons are in English), the translators spend some of their most frustrating moments fumbling with slang, idioms and figures of speech.

Some English expressions either have no handy French equivalent or would be meaningless if translated literally. "Gerrymandering", for instance, has to be written ponderously as **« le remaniement arbitraire de la carte électorale. »**

When Jack Pickersgill suggested that "the minister was talking off the top of his head", the French Hansard simply reported him as saying, **« le ministre ne savait trop de quoi il parlait »** ("the minister didn't know what he was talking about"). The translators make it a point of pride to avoid English words wherever possible. "Oh, fiddlesticks !", for instance, becomes **« Quelles balivernes ! »** ("What silliness !").

Coined phrases and slang that do have brief equivalents often lose their savor. "Rolling readjustment" translates colorlessly as **« rajustement progressif »**; "That is pretty cocky talk" becomes, pedantically, **« Voilà un propos bien prétentieux »**; and "a plank in a party platform" disappears as a figure of speech, emerging as **« un article du programme d'un parti. »**

"Everything loses in translation", one translator admits. But the loss is sometimes the result of stringent directives the staff must follow. One cardinal rule is : "Don't go beyond the thought of the author". Thus, if an MP said, "The stork paid a visit" to a certain family, the translators would have to pass up two colorful euphemisms : **« Un bébé a été trouvé sous une feuille de chou »** ("A baby was found under a cabbage leaf") and — from French-Canadian folklore — **« Les sauvages ont passé chez Madame Unetelle »** ("The Indians passed Mrs. Soandso's house"). The translation would have to be the straightforward **« Il y avait une naissance. »**

Some colloquialisms survive intact. When Arnold Peters (CCF, Timiskaming) yelled, "Sit down ! You're rocking the boat", a translator wrote, faithfully, **« Asseyez-vous ! Vous faites ballotter le bateau. »** But when a MP talks about "shooting from the hip" or "pulling the wool over somebody's eyes", the translators just do the best they can.

When all else fails, they write **« Ici un jeu de mots intraduisible. »** (Literally, "Here, an untranslatable play on words".) One translator was reduced to such a confession last autumn, when an MP spun a tale about three bulls : A big bull, a medium-sized bull and a small bull went for a walk. After two of them tired and quit, the small one was still walking. "This", said the MP, "goes to show that a little bull will go a long way".

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Translators (as well as pun-haters) cringed, too, when an MP brought forth this old chestnut : "My honorable friend across the way reminds me of a mug-wump sitting on a fence, with his mug on one side and his wump on the other". The translator bravely profferetd, **« avec le mug sur un côté et le wump sur l'autre, »** then added an opologetic phrase about untranslatability.

A few phrases gain brevity in translation. One of Prime Minister Diefenbaker's pets, "to the end that", becomes simply **« pour. »** And his cumbersome "in view of the fact that" translates neatly as **« vu que. »**

But, to the translators' chagrin, Diefenbaker and other MPs often talk like the lawyers that 77 of them are, weaving long, involved sentences out of judicialese. Opposition Leader Pearson, though no lawyer, also gets low marks from the translators, for his habit of interjecting long subordinate clauses into the middle of his sentences. Hazen Argue, the CCF's House leader, is the translators' favorite. They say he uses simple words in short, logical sentences.

With their short deadlines, translators are allowed a few shortcuts. They never translate poetry, and they lift Shakespearean quotations out of published French translations. Expressions from Alice in Wonderland are translated (because the book is known to the French-speaking world) but allusions to Mother Goose aren't. since the French Mother Goose stories differ from the English.

The French Hansard usually runs much longer than the English. In '59 the English was 7,600 pages; the French, more than 8,000. — **Klaus Neumann.**

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