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Frederick Elkin and Mary B. Hill

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ADVERTISING IN A BILINGUAL CITY

Frederick ELKIN, Montréal

Mary B. HILL, Buffalo *

In a bilingual and bicultural setting, commercial establishments which seek customers from both groups make certain adaptations. They have bilingual clerks; communicate in their accounts, notices, and advertisements in two languages; and, to some degree, take into account the distinctive characteristics and sensitivities of the two groups. Such is the situation in Montreal where two thirds of the population is French Canadian and French speaking.

Among the sensitive subjects in French Canada in recent years has been the quality of the French language. The widespread use of anglicisms, the limited range of vocabulary, the careless pronunciation and spelling have — most notably in *Les Insolences du Frère Untel*¹ — been vigorously denounced. To counteract such shortcomings, the provincial government has instituted an Office of the French Language; radio and television stations present programmes correcting common errors; the Publicité Club de Montréal cites as one aim, "to maintain the quality of French language advertising"; and spokesmen of educational and intellectual groups constantly affirm that improvement of the language is a crucial step in the cultural renaissance of French Canada.

In this paper, we focus on French language policies in department store advertising in Montreal and the adaptations to this "sensitive subject". These stores, in a pattern common for large commercial enterprises in Quebec, are English in origin, control, and reputation; but their economic success depends on the continued patronage of both ethnic groups². Seeking the good will of all potential customers, they are sen-

(*) M. Frederick Elkin est professeur agrégé à l'Université de Montréal et Mme Hill «instructor» à l'Université de Buffalo. Cet intéressant travail, même s'il a été fait essentiellement du point de vue de deux sociologues, touche à des problèmes brûlants pour les traducteurs et les rédacteurs d'annonces canadiens. Le lecteur trouvera, en fin d'article, les réactions d'un linguiste et stylisticien bien connu, le professeur Jean Darbelnet, de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université Laval. N.D.L.R.

(1) Anon., *Les Insolences du Frère Untel* (Montréal, Les Éditions de l'homme, 1960).

(2) See especially E. C. Hughes, *French Canada in Transition* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1943) and J.-C. Falardeau, ed., *Essais sur le Canada français* (Québec, les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1953).

sitive to disagreements and pressures which might affect their profits, pressures which, at the moment in Quebec, come more from French than from English Canadians.

* More precisely in this paper we ask: how do department stores, which advertise daily in English and French, manage their linguistic advertising problems? Do they regard this as a subject of concern? Do they cater to the popular mass with "jounal," "anglicismes," and an "American" style; or to the elite, with a standard French? How do they translate English terms for which there are no direct French equivalents? Does their advertising, at least linguistically, represent an anglicizing force?

This report is based on a comparison of 376 pages of comparable advertising — representing selected periods of regular, holiday, and special sale advertising — by two department stores in Montreal's afternoon English and French newspapers, the *Montreal Star* and *La Presse*. The department store advertisements in Montreal's morning newspapers, the *Gazette* and *Le Devoir*, are not directly comparable and are not included in this analysis. The advertisements in the *Montreal Star* and *La Presse* were compared item by item to see what adaptations, if any, were made. Supplementing the content analysis were some 26 interviews with advertising and merchandising personnel in the two stores.³

¶ BILINGUAL CONTENT AND STYLE

Ideally, many store executives acknowledge, each store would have two advertising departments, one English and one French, each taking into account the language and culture of the respective ethnic group. High costs, however, rule out such a policy and the stores have adopted the alternative of translation. The advertisements are essentially written, designed, and illustrated in English and then the descriptive copy is adapted into French⁴. At times, the translators also face the problem of preparing their versions for a smaller space. Adapting the advertisements involves two sub-problems, translation and language style.

¶ **Translation.** In the English advertisements — in almost one third of those analyzed — many terms are "coined," that is, used with other than their ordinary dictionary meanings. How do the translators handle this? In a few instances, the terms were left untranslated, for example, advertisements in both the *Montreal Star* and *La Presse* spoke of "polojamas" or cotton "drip-dry". In some 55 per cent of the cases, the coined term was omitted and the item identified in common French terminology. The *Montreal Star* advertisement read "cha-cha boots," *La Presse* "bottines"; the *Star* "snapperall," *La Presse* "salopettes"; the *Star* "men's casuals," *La Presse* "pantalons, hommes"; the *Star* "fle-

(3) The data cited in this report are taken from Mary B. Hill, *Bilingual Advertising in the Retail Enterprise* (Montreal, Master's thesis, McGill University, 1963).

(4) There are a few exceptions. Institutional advertisements, for example, for St. Jean Baptiste Day, are prepared originally in French.

a-desk," *La Presse* "pupitres, pratiques"; the *Star* "bulkies," *La Presse* "chandails". A chief translator and department manager respectively commented:

A lot of the coined terms in English just sound silly in French. Take « cha-cha » boots for instance. This name wouldn't mean anything to the French. Americans use these terms... but we can't use them in French.

The French are not used to wisecracking or gimcracking or the slogan world, so they cannot translate this. This causes a lot of difficulty too. You get so many of these in English and American ads; in tonight's paper here you see « baby dolls, » and « rainettes, » and « flats ». None of these mean anything to the French.

In over 40 per cent of the cases, the problem of coined words was resolved by describing the item in French. The *Montreal Star* says "baby dolls," *La Presse* "pyjamas courts"; the *Star* "our butter-soft continental casuals," *La Presse* "souliers tout-aller souples, style continental"; the *Star* "rainettes for Misses and Teens," *La Presse* "couvre-chaussures en plastique pour demoiselles et adolescentes"; the *Star* "one-of-a-kind," *La Presse* "à exemplaire unique".

The store personnel, of course, were alert to such difficulties. An assistant department and advertising manager respectively remarked:

Just look at this ad. It is labelled, « Ivy League ». In the first place the French don't know what « Ivy League » means, and they are not the slightest bit interested in turning out like a well-dressed upper class American Princeton graduate.

Perhaps the French loses something in the process, it is bound in... take our ad... for our « Gold Rush » sale... This means something in English — Gold Rush to the Klondike, California, etc. The French do not have the same idea or even conception as we do, and they don't accept the term « Gold Rush » as an everyday term.

Technical terms, referring especially to tools, fabrics, and clothing styles, which appear in some 9 per cent of the advertisements in *La Presse*, also create problems for the translators. These items are often of American origin and of recent date and no consensus has been reached on their French equivalents. "Turtle-neck," for example was variously translated as "encolure ronde," "encolure roulée," "chandails T" (the English advertisement read "turtle-neck T shirts) and in one instance was left untranslated, the illustration apparently being considered self-explanatory.

The two sample stores translated some terms differently. In one store "composition soles" became "à semelles de matière synthétique"; in the other, "semelles composition". "No-sag" springs was "pas de ressorts," in one store and "ressorts no-sag," in the other; one spoke of "tricots" or "chandails," the other kept the English "cardigans" and "pullovers".

"Zipper" was a problem term. In one advertisement it was translated "fermeture éclair," in another "ghassière"; "Zip-line" loden cloth became "doublure amovible en tissu loden"; and at one time, through error, the translation was "gros zipper".

A department manager explained:

We had a new translator then and he might have used the English word « zipper » thinking it was a trade name. This is quite incorrect in French and is completely banned in our language in this store. The ordinary people use it, but we have no reason for using it here.

In women's sizes, the lack of a French equivalent for the English "Misses", was variously handled. One store generally used "jeune femme," the other "demoiselles". One respondent commented:

We have a great deal of trouble with Misses' size. The French translators put in « jeune femme » usually and this takes the customers down to the third floor where the adolescent girls' sizes are. This is always causing us trouble. The customers get the wrong idea. We... are still trying to get the right word. [Try « jeune fille », NDLR.]

"Panama" once raised an issue. A translator used the same term in adapting the French advertisement, but a colleague affirmed that "panama" in French indicates a thicker coarser material than in English — all of which led to a last minute change in the French adaptation from "panama" to "chapeau frais de paille d'été".

Sometimes the translators could find no succinct French technical term and described the product. "Eyeshadow" became "le bâtonnet de fard à paupières", and "protect your cooling system now," became "n'attendez pas à la dernière minute pour prendre les précautions contre le gel de l'eau du moteur de votre voiture". Keeping abreast of technical terms in French translations is a recurrent problem. Said one respondent:

It is often difficult (especially for technical items) for the translator to visualize exactly what we are trying to say in English because of certain shadings in the language... all advertising and instructions are in English when they come from the manufacturer, so we often have to use English words. We don't have any contact with France, and people do get used to foreign terms and adopt them. When we run up against trouble, we find out what they call it in France by looking up French books, catalogues, etc. Sometimes we ask the Department managers what the people call the item when they come in to buy it.

The solutions to such problems are not simple. The general policy, as our examples illustrate, is to avoid English terms and give preference to standard French rather than to locally developed derivatives. Sometimes, however — since, above all, the advertisements must be understood by the public to whom they are addressed — local usages are employed. "Bowling shoes," for example, is translated as "souliers de quilleurs"; in France, *quilleur* was long ago replaced by the English "bowling". The following illustrations and comments show both the dilemmas and the preferences of the advertising personnel:

« Chaudière » is used in Canada as « bucket, » which is a true meaning. However, it also has another meaning, the main unit of a central heating system. We use « fournaise » for the main unit, but we really should use the other form. We don't yet, because we want to sell merchandise, and this is what the people understand. We must get at it slowly, we don't want to re-educate the people too quickly; if we did that, they wouldn't understand it exactly as it should be.

« Cuisinière » originally had two meanings: a woman who cooks, and the stove she cooks on. In Quebec until about two or three years ago, it had only one meaning, « a woman who cooks ». In France, however, the word still has both meanings. In the past two years, we have used the word to mean a « cooking stove » only.

¶ **Style.** The two stores had different styles in their English advertising. One store employed a rather "breezy," "Americanized" style and some three quarters of its advertisements had terms or phrasing classified as colloquial, forceful, or with questionable grammar. Note such colloquial expressions as "get hep with the college set this fall," "puts you in the groove," "put hep in your step with," "be tops with"; or such grammar as "be just right 'most' every time" or "softy heavy washable wool"; or such dramatic phrasing as "exciting savings for the picture-takers," "be young, be gay, be the belle of the ball in," "don't miss this exciting new fashion," "buy now, you can't afford to miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity". Even for the second store, which more consciously sought a dignified advertising, such phrases or expressions were found in over 25 per cent of the advertisements.

In contrast, the style of the French advertising in both stores was precise, restrained, grammatically correct, and avoided colloquialisms. An advertisement in the *Montreal Star* read, "the affluence of alligator," *La Presse*, "en bel alligator"; the *Star*, "There's more value for your fashion dollar," *La Presse*, "Vous obtenez davantage pour l'argent que vous déboursez"; the *Star*, "For TOPS in VALUE, TOPS in STYLE, shop with confidence at," *La Presse*, "Vous magasinez avec confiance chez"; the *Star*, "Don't miss... this special 'once-in-a-season' offer! A new mirror can work wonders, because it brilliantly creates the effect of more space and extra light. Almost a 'new dimension' for your room," *La Presse*, "Avez-vous déjà pensé à l'effet de profondeur, de richesse et de clarté qu'un grand miroir peut produire dans une pièce? Non seulement décore-t-il,* mais il anime".

The respondents gave two basic reasons for the more restrained correct style of the French advertising: the influence of newspapers and other spokesmen and especially the preference of the French-Canadian public. The French-Canadian customers, it was felt, would react strongly against the breezy forceful style of many English advertisements.

—We are trying not to tell people what to do in French, just suggesting. The French people are very independent, they don't want to be forced, we should suggest not push... The *Star* is forceful, pushing... For instance the English heading in tomorrow's paper reads, "closed Monday, shop in... Tuesday." We changed the French to read, "closed Monday and will be at your service Tuesday morning".

—The French are realistic... You just present the goods to the French simply and directly, no sales pitch and no frills... fancy stuff doesn't go with them, you get much better results from a very straight photo, from telling a realistic and straight story and don't go beating around the bush.

—We do occasionally have to use, not colloquialisms exactly, but the language of the common people, which isn't always good French... if we used the correct... French the people wouldn't understand it... (Using colloquialisms) doesn't happen very often... Our language in

(*) Anglicisme. NDLR.

these papers is more French and more pure than in France... We can't afford to take liberties with the language or the newspapers and the people would be down on us, whereas in France they don't care so much.

—We are very conscious of not making errors in French... We are told if we do make a mistake in French by the customers and *La Presse*.

II CONCLUSION

Does advertising of department stores linguistically represent an anglicising force for French Canada? In some respects, the answer is surely, "yes". The products sold are essentially North American and the accompanying advertising follows suit. Thus the names of products, trade names, illustrations, and the basic organization of advertisements are essentially similar in the two language, with English the primary and French the adapted language.⁵ In certain respects, however, in the vocabulary and to some extent the style, the answer currently tends to be "no". The advertising personnel take care to avoid anglicisms, glaring instances of "joul," and a "breezy" style and, if a choice is offered, to choose a standard rather than a local or anglicized French. In this sense, the language of advertising represents the elite rather than the man in the street.

The interviews indicate that department store executives are much more concerned now with the language of advertisements than a decade or so ago. Basically underlying the concern is the fact that French Canadians have become increasingly important as customers, a development based primarily on the economic progress of Quebec — a process that is expected to continue — and the increasing movement of French Canadians to the city.

The store directors — as are the directors of any commercial enterprise — are anxious to gain the good will of these customers or potential customers and to avoid controversy or unpleasant publicity. Those most likely to affect this good will are those French Canadians who have been in the vanguard of the recent ferment in Quebec, those who speak up and obtain publicity. Along with a nationalism and modernization, these French Canadians have been advocating a cultural renaissance, which includes (as well as closer links with France and progress in such fields as literature, art, and the theatre) an improvement in the quality of the language. The store executives, aware of this ferment and eager to maintain good will, thus pay considerable attention to the quality of their French language advertising, more than to the English.

The advertising personnel themselves, those who actually adapt the advertisements, also play an important role for they too experience the social ferment. In encouraging good French, they are participating, along with other French-Canadian leaders, in the movement to develop

(5) F. Elkin, « A Study of Advertisements in Montreal Newspapers, » *In Canadian Communications* (v. 1, no. 4), p. 15-22 and 30.

a worthy French-Canadian culture. They thereby gain both greater self-esteem and the respect of colleagues and other groups important to them.

If we might generalize from these data, this study suggests that in a bicultural and bilingual setting, a commercial establishment which caters to both groups, does not, at least in its advertising, necessarily appeal to the "lowest common denominator" or slavishly imitate the patterns of the dominant group. Variables such as societal trends, pressure groups, and the sentiments of the operating personnel all play a part in the decisions to be made.

