

□ AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION SERVICE □

Working in the translation services of the Department of External Affairs is never (well...almost never) dull.

Although non-rotational, translators feel very much part of foreign service life because we translate everything from consular instructions to classified analyses of economic and political situations in various parts of the world. We also translate those all-important documents, the Foreign Service Directives.

I have written this article to give *Liaison* readers some idea of what happens to the work that comes to the Department's translation services. One question that I hear often is: Why does it occasionally take such a long time to have just one or two pages translated?

This can indeed be frustrating for someone in a hurry. The answer, simply put, is that while their job alone does not demand a lot of time, in the context of the workload of the translation service, it must wait its turn. No translation can be finished before someone begins to work on it!

There may already be a backlog of texts waiting to be translated. All translators are probably in the middle of working on other texts, work which will have been interrupted frequently by some more pressing project. (The percentage of urgent translations at the Department of External Affairs exceeds that in other departments. This is attributable, at least partly, to the fact that we have three ministers (External Affairs, International Trade, and External Relations), as well as many deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers.) All of this adds up to a longer wait for your two pages than you might wish.

What happens when a text is sent to the translation service? First, the work must be recorded and the number

of words must be counted. The text is then assigned to a translator, with due regard to the workload, the speed and, if possible, the expertise of each member of the unit.

No-one can be a specialist in all the fields that External Affairs deals with — personnel administration, accounting, data processing, nuclear energy, economic and political analyses, demography, to name only a few — so the second step is to assemble the necessary reference documents. These may include such things as forms, previous texts, and lexicons. Clients can be extremely helpful and reduce the time their translation will take if they send such documentation with their requests for translation.

When the translator receives a text, she or he checks the documentation sent by the client and consults as well our library, the terminology bank, his colleagues and the client for clarification. This can be a time-consuming task if the text is highly specialized or contains many names of organizations or titles of documents or programs. Rather than simply translating the French or English, the translator must make every reasonable effort to find the precise name.

Once the actual translation is completed, the translator either types it up or dictates it for a typist. In the latter case, it is returned to the translator for fine-tuning.

In many cases the text is then reviewed by another person — the reviser. The reviser checks that the meaning of the original text has been conveyed and makes any necessary corrections or improvements.

The text goes back to the typist, who makes the changes requested by the translator or reviser. Then comes a last review by the translator, and the text is ready.

It is then the responsibility of the administrative area. The clerk makes sure that the translation, the original and the attachments are annexed to the request for translation. One of three things is then done, depending on circumstances: 1) the text is placed in an envelope and addressed; 2) it is simply left in a basket; or, 3) the client is contacted so that he/she can arrange for the text to be picked up.

This is an outline of the route taken by a text through our translation service. Needless to say, there are many times when a curve is thrown into this straight path.

If a text is long and urgent, it must be divided among several translators. As well as making administrative controls more complex, this can give rise to duplication in research and a lack of consistency in vocabulary or style. It is particularly important that one person read the entire translation to edit for such consistency.

Such urgent jobs can be very demanding for the translators. Such jobs also put considerable stress on the clerks and the typists. The work of these people is an important part of the whole process, and their cooperation is essential to an effective translation service.

I trust that this overview will give you some idea of what happens to "just one or two pages" as they come to the translation service.

We appreciate the courtesy and understanding of our clients. And we enjoy the variety of interesting texts we translate — especially those documents containing advice for Canadian public servants and their families who are posted abroad and documents on current international issues — at the Department of External Affairs □

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