

Here is an excerpt from

Gagnon, Chantal (2014) January/February 1977: Independence, Secession, Political Duels... Or Lévesque and Trudeau in the United States, *Translation Effects, The Shaping of Modern Canadian Culture*, Kathy Mezei, Sherry Simon et Luise von Flotow (dirs), Montréal, [McGill-Queens University Press](#), 131-141.

**January/February 1977: Independence, Secession, Political Duels...
Or Lévesque and Trudeau in the United States**

Chantal Gagnon

Translated by Trish Van Bolderen

Pierre Elliott Trudeau and René Lévesque have become like an old married couple whose bickerings are a kind of performance. These two men, hailed by Quebecers as national saviours, have deployed great bravado to lead us through hopelessly personal battles to the deadest of dead ends of our history.

(Lise Payette, *Le pouvoir? Connais pas!*)
(Translated by Trish Van Bolderen)

When Two Enemy Brothers Face Off

In Quebec and Canada, the months of January and February 1977 were marked by a historic duel between two great political rivals. In one corner, René Lévesque and his 25 January 1977 speech to the Economic Club of New York; in the other, Pierre Elliott Trudeau with his 22 February 1977 response in Washington, to the United States House of Representatives. Each politician's speech was translated at that time, and excerpts were published in newspapers in Quebec, Anglophone Canada and the United States. Both Quebec natives of the same generation, Lévesque and Trudeau were symbols par excellence of the political antagonism between Quebec sovereignty and Canadian federalism. Consequently, Trudeau and Lévesque were known as "frères ennemis," or enemy brothers. Throughout their careers, these men engaged in bitter battles, and their January and February 1977 speeches are striking examples of these.

The speeches they delivered on US soil are historic in that they relate to contemporary history and reflect the sociopolitical ties between Quebec and Canada in the 1970s. Moreover, this event is often described in the biographies of these politicians. Comparing Lévesque and Trudeau's speeches allows us to make certain observations about how the translations affected the speeches' respective audiences. The following discussion will focus on these effects by contextualizing each speech and its translation, as well as presenting a snapshot of the political vocabulary and ideologies used in the translations.

[...]

Translating the Political Vocabulary of the Speeches

Given the close relationship between politics and language, it is important to analyze the semantic elements found in political speeches. The translation choices made for this type of discourse are generally informed by the text's intended audience, which is identified by either the translator or the institution paying for the translation.

From US Independence to the Independence of Quebec

In his speech, René Lévesque used the political vocabulary belonging to his party's ideology: nationalism. Jean-François Lisée summarizes it well:

Lévesque certainly could have sung his separatist anthem less emphatically. He used the terms "independence" and "sovereignty" 13 times -- and uttered the evil word "separation," which is used in the Declaration of Independence -- without once connecting them to the word "association." A new record. (trans. by Van Bolderen)

Lisée's calculation applies to the English text only: in the French, the terms "indépendance" (independence) and "souveraineté" (sovereignty) appear ten times. What accounts for this difference? The word "independence" appears so frequently in the English version of Lévesque's speech because the main goal of the speech was to encourage the US public to connect their Declaration of Independence to Quebec's independence project. The following example, taken from Lévesque's speech, supports this assertion:

Et comme base de cet engagement, nous avons donné à nos concitoyens l'assurance de tenir, sur la question de l'indépendance, un référendum qui permettra à tous les Québécois en âge de voter, sans distinction d'origine, de se prononcer sur **l'avenir du Québec**. ("Québec" 9)

As you probably know, we have solemnly assured our fellow citizens that a referendum will be held on the question, so that all Quebecers of voting age, without distinction as to their origins, will share equally in **this historic decision on independence**. ("Quebec" 8-9)

By reworking the translated text and emphasizing the idea of independence in English, Lévesque hoped he could convince US citizens of the validity of his statement -- that is, that the independence proposed by his government was similar to the United States Declaration of Independence. In other words, he wanted to make it clear to his audience that the Parti Québécois government wanted the kind of independence achieved by Americans two centuries earlier. However, the Americans did not understand independence the same way the Péquistes did: they completely rejected Lévesque's bold comparison between the political situations in Quebec and the United States. The Francophone audience of the speech was equally unimpressed by Lévesque's strategy: emotionally and politically loaded, the word "indépendance" (independence) was off-

putting for many Quebecers, hence the reason Lévesque generally used it sparingly, preferring the more ambiguous and less threatening term “souveraineté” (sovereignty).

From the US War of Secession to the Secession of Quebec

The table below presents four occurrences in Trudeau’s speech of political terms related to independence, and the translation for each.

English version of the speech	French version of the speech
Separation (p.2)	Sécession (p.2)
Separation (p.3)	Sécession (p.3)
Separation (p.3)	Séparation (p.3)
Sudden departure of Quebec (p.3)	Sécession (p.3)

The word most frequently chosen in Trudeau’s English speech -- “separation” -- was used by the federal government throughout the first term of the Parti Québécois. During this period the government never used the word “sécession” (secession). So, what does this translation choice suggest? The answer lies in the communicative context of the original speech: the speech was delivered in the United States, which had known its own war of secession, the Civil War (1861-1865). According to political scientist Louis Balthazar, the US associated the Quebec independence project with their war of secession (Bouchard, “La victoire”). The term “sécession” in the translation prepared for Francophones reminded all sovereigntist and federalist Quebecers that the United States saw Quebec independence in a negative light. It is important also to remember that Trudeau’s speech was a response to the address Lévesque had delivered. Lévesque had been unsuccessful in his attempt to convince the US businessmen of the connection between the independence of Quebec and that of the United States. More skilful than Lévesque, Trudeau wanted to avoid being criticized by the US for associating Quebec’s secession and the US war of secession. However, nothing prevented him from drawing this parallel when he delivered his speech in French, since the Americans would read or hear only the English version.

Conclusion

The episode of Lévesque and Trudeau in the United States reveals certain features that are characteristic of political speech translations in general. Specifically, it points to two phenomena that directly affect all audiences of translated speeches, namely power relations and the textual treatment of ideological terms.

The issue of “partisan” translation is at the heart of these power relations since this type of translation risks excluding a portion of the audience. In the original, French version of Lévesque’s speech, the Quebec premier in large part addressed the Péquiste voters who had elected him. When the speech was translated for the so-called primary audience -- that is, the US citizens at the Economic Club -- the partisan aspects of the speech were not properly adapted: rather than giving US citizens the speech of a head of

state, Lévesque delivered a party leader speech, the results of which have already been discussed. That being stated, partisan translations are merely an example of power struggles. In Canada, for example, tensions between linguistic communities sometimes lead the Prime Minister to neglect certain minority groups. This was the case with the speech Jean Chrétien gave during the 1995 referendum campaign: even though Chrétien professed that his message to the nation addressed all Canadians, the French version of the speech excluded Francophones living outside of Quebec (Gagnon, “Language Plurality”). At the European Union (EU), minority groups have been equally poorly served by translation. The case of Finnish institutional documentation has been well recorded: the syntax and terminology imposed on Finnish translators at the EU seem to complicate the readability of texts, consequently making these kinds of speeches very difficult if not impossible for the general public to access (Gambier, “Mouvances eurolinguistiques”; Pym, “The European Union and Its Future Languages”; and Koskinen, “Institutional Illusions”).

The implications of political speeches are generally significant, which is why each ideological term (in both the original and the translated texts) is carefully considered and selected by the translating institution. Yet the examples discussed above demonstrate that a term’s effect on the audience is not always the one anticipated. In French as much as in English, the use of “indépendance/independence” did not appeal to the audience. Given that the English version of Lévesque’s speech was particularly poorly received by the US public, it seems clear that the cultural and political dimensions of the speech were not adequately considered during the translation process. The mission of Quebec in the United States was an abysmal failure, even though Lévesque’s government had counted on support from the United States in order to legitimize its sovereignty project in the eyes of Canadians and the international community. Perhaps because he had learned from the mistakes made by his Quebec counterpart, the Canadian prime minister was relatively successful in Washington. Moreover, the changes reflected in the French translation reached a public Trudeau knew intimately, since he belonged to the same cultural community as that of the target audience. Therefore, by understanding the culture of the target audience, his translator could more accurately predict the effects of the translation on that public and translate accordingly. This assertion joins Schäffner’s work (“Third Ways and New Centres”), which deals with another case where translating ideological terms led to a lukewarm response: the document “Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte,” co-produced in 1999 by the British Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Schäffner explains that textual choices made in translations of political speeches have notable consequences for political parties and society. She also believes that terms rooted in the history of a language or culture must be translated carefully, for fear of being received poorly. Hitler’s autobiography (*Mein Kampf*) also illustrates the problems associated with translating words that are ideologically loaded. In his study *Translating Hitler’s Mein Kampf*, Baumgarten uses the concept of “semantic instability” (Sornig, “Some Remarks on Linguistic Strategies of Persuasion”) to discuss the textual treatment of certain delicate expressions in *Mein Kampf*. A term is considered semantically unstable when, context permitting, it generates strong feelings within the reader. According to Baumgarten, some translators of *Mein Kampf* exploited the instability of certain words in order to establish Hitler’s political credibility. Whether concerned with narrowing an emotional gap or narrowing a political-cultural gap, the

process of translating ideological terms requires sensitivity, given that the results can have either a positive or a negative impact on the way in which the text is received.

Generally, history offers few examples of translated political speeches. Yet the power of these political texts and the impact they have on their audiences deserve to be highlighted and analyzed. When the important effects of these texts are overlooked, so too is the possibility of better understanding society -- its politics, culture and history.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Trudeau, Pierre Elliott. Address. Réunion conjointe de la Chambre des représentants et du Sénat des États-Unis / Joint Meeting of the House of Representatives and the Senate of the United States. Canadian Embassy. Washington, DC. 22 Feb. 1977.

Lévesque, René. "*Québec : Good Neighbour in Transition.*" Economic Club of New York. Hilton Hotel, New York. 25 Jan. 1977. [Original French text. 14 Dec. 2009. <http://www.mri.gouv.qc.ca/document/SPDI/FondDoc/FDOC_alloc_1574_19770125_levesque-rene.htm >.]

---. "Quebec: Good Neighbour in Transition." Translated by René Lévesque. Economic Club of New York. Hilton Hotel, New York. 25 Jan. 1977.

[...]