

The Language Question in Canadian Associations*

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In a federal country like Canada, it is not surprising to note that the great majority of nonprofit organizations or associations with a national scope have adopted the same federal structure, with all the advantages and disadvantages that this entails. On the linguistic front, Canadian associations operating nationally have, as a general rule, followed the evolution of the country as a whole, though perhaps some would say a few years behind the pace. The first step was the acceptance of the fact of the existence of a French-speaking element, the second the adoption of effective language measures to respond to the aspirations of the francophones.

Very few national associations had addressed the language question before 1960. Only with the Quiet Revolution and the affirmation of Quebec's distinct identity was this question considered in a serious and systematic manner, as it continues to be to this day. While this has been done more or less smoothly in most national associations, some have had great difficulty in changing their ways, in particular where the language question served to aggravate stresses that originated in unrelated causes.

Just as Quebec has continued to stand up for itself within Canada, French language members of associations have little by little claimed, and obtained from the national associations, a necessary minimum of services in French in return for their contributions. It goes without saying that the number and quality of these services in French vary enormously from one type of association to another. For example, a national charitable organization would be likely to have dealt with the French question, depending of course on its client base, well before a national professional association with voluntary membership or another with "captive" members.

From a practical point of view, bilingualism takes a number of forms in our national associations. In a few associations, almost everything is done in both official languages: provision of services to members, publications, conferences, meetings, etc. This complete linguistic duality can appear very expensive, but it often represents a very small part of a large annual budget.

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Other associations, however, provide little or no service in French. This is often the case with national associations which have neither the finances nor the staff to afford such flexibility. These associations are usually found at the most basic level of association life, i.e., the simple struggle for survival. An example could be an association of scientists in a rather obscure and underpopulated field.

The greatest number of national associations falls between these two extremes. These organizations try to reflect the linguistic duality of the country, and of their members, with more or less satisfactory results. Some boards of directors have accepted the new direction with enthusiasm, others have rather backed into it. It would appear that the availability of services in French is directly related to the militancy of the French-speaking members. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. It was noted earlier that national nonprofit associations reflect the federal structure of Canada, for better and for worse. Just as Quebec often finds itself alone against nine provinces on the political level, the majority of the boards of our national associations often have one francophone among 10 directors. If this director does not have a strong personality and a thick skin, bilingualism will come very slowly to the organization.

Let us examine how national associations treat the language question in practice.

Annual Meetings

Many professional associations provide simultaneous translation at the annual general meeting. The notice of the meeting and the agenda are generally circulated in both official languages; however, working documents and information handed out at the meeting or even distributed well in advance are often in one language only. What's more, the guest speakers are either intentionally or necessarily English speaking. As a result, anglophone members do not use their receivers for the simultaneous translation. This reinforces the myth that simultaneous translation is only useful for francophones, and that, if the meeting is expensive, it is because of them.

Annual Conferences

The prohibitive cost of simultaneous translation at the annual conference has persuaded the great majority of associations to maintain the status quo and do nothing in French. Some others, somewhat more enlightened, offer a few sessions in which all the proceedings are in French.

Management

When the language question began to make itself felt, many associations found themselves with a unilingual general manager or executive director in his or her prime. It was out of the question to dismiss this person. Rather, the associations chose to wait for several years (some are still waiting!) for the

general manager to retire so that they might finally hire a bilingual candidate. For example, in 1970 a national professional association hired a unilingual general manager, against the advice of its French-speaking members. The new manager stayed at the helm until his death in 1980. Only then, 20 years after the Quiet Revolution, did this association hire its first bilingual (i.e., francophone) manager. It should be noted that the 1970 decision demoralized the Quebec members of this profession, who have not since that time joined the organization in significant numbers.

Support Staff

At this level, associations generally hire bilingual (francophone) staff for jobs in direct contact with the public or members of the association. In a place such as the Ottawa region, where the great majority of national associations are located, hiring competent bilingual support staff can be easier than elsewhere, but still expensive. That “rare gem”, the employee whose knowledge of both official languages is at least acceptable, is easier to find in the Ottawa-Hull area than anywhere else, even Montreal. However, the associations are competing for these employees against the federal government and a plethora of other organizations, such as financial institutions and Crown corporations, that can offer high salaries, bilingualism bonuses, and benefit packages that many nonprofit organizations cannot match.

It is worth noting that if all the members of the support staff cannot express themselves competently in both official languages, it is inevitable that the language of the head office of the organization will be English.

Publications

Once again, given the high cost of translation, several national associations have chosen to publish articles in the language of their authors. In some cases, this practice has had results that we would call absurd if they weren't so sad. In certain national scientific organizations, the French-speaking members prefer to submit articles in English in order to attract more readers. Francophones then criticize the publication and the organization because it does not publish articles in French. These members claim with justification that the publication is the only tangible thing they get for their membership fees. The vicious circle becomes a downward spiral.

Meetings

The sections and committees created by a national association are generally constituted geographically (“all regions of the country must be represented”). The members of these sections and committees are therefore chosen to represent British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. Once again the French speaker will be in the minority and the meetings will invari-

ably be carried on in English. What is worse, the choice of the Quebec delegate will often depend on his or her knowledge of the other language, rather than on competence in the work that the section or committee is expected to perform.

Presidency

The elected volunteer president of a national association will sooner or later be the francophone member of the board of directors. Only then will the bilingual general manager or executive director be able to relax and get on with the job. He or she will finally not have to play the role of the francophone counterweight to the unilingual anglophone president.

The language question for our national associations is how to balance the desire to represent properly the two founding peoples who clearly do have interests in common (or they would not be members of the same association), against the limited resources available to make a creditable job of such representation.

Under the circumstances, the degree of bilingualism in our national associations is almost always related to the vigilance of their francophone members who have learned, here as elsewhere, that they cannot blindly rely on goodwill alone from their anglophone colleagues on “the other side”.