

Translating for Quebec: Eight Essential Rules to Follow

By Grant Hamilton

Just north of New England lies the Canadian province of Quebec. Unlike other parts of Canada that bear some resemblance to the U.S., Quebec is never mistaken for an American state. It is a completely different world, mainly because of the widespread use of French.

Quebec's St. Lawrence River Valley was colonized by the French and has remained French-speaking to this day. Although the British conquered it in 1759, they were afraid the inhabitants would ally themselves with the American rebels to the south, so they allowed them to keep their Catholic faith and continue using French as the language of instruction. As a result, the 60,000 residents of New France grew to form the basis of modern-day Quebec, where over 6 million people have French as their mother tongue and another 1.5 million speak it as a second language.

A Great Translation Market

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ment it produces. It is also the reason that companies doing business there call on translators. If you translate between English and French, Quebec can be a great source of work.

Before you start, however, know that there are traps. Some can ensnare any translator, while others are a specific danger to either French or English translators. Fall into them, and you may lose clients as fast as you find them.

Rule #1: Know the Geography

You need to know your geography even if you never translate geographical texts. Consider the story of our summer intern a few years ago who had to translate *en Virginie* into English and, mystifyingly, wrote *in the Virginias*. When questioned why she put Virginia in the plural, she answered, "Well, the French didn't specify whether it was in West Virginia or East Virginia."

So, get out a map and familiarize yourself with Quebec. Learn the names of all the major cities and towns and their locations in relation to each other. While you are at it, why not study a map of the U.S., too? It will almost certainly make you a better translator. (I bet that more than one person reading this article did not know there is no such state as East Virginia!) If you translate into English, find out if any of the place names get translated. (Yes, some do, but most do not.) Also learn about the main geographical points of interest—the St. Lawrence River, the Ottawa River, the Laurentian Mountains, the Saguenay Fjord, and the Gaspé Peninsula, to name a few.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- There are 89 geographical names that stay French in Quebec but are used in English in neighboring

provinces. You can check them out here: geonames.nrcan.gc.ca/info/dual_e.php.

- It is often wise to check the official spelling of Quebec place names. You can do it here: www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/CT/toposweb/recherche.aspx.
- Names of pan-Canadian significance are translated into English, even in Quebec. Learn them here: geonames.nrcan.gc.ca/info/pan_can_e.php.

Rule #2: Know the System of Government

Start by learning about the capital city (Québec, called Quebec City in English to distinguish it from its namesake province). Then find out what they do there (there is a parliament, but no congress). Learn that elected representatives are called *députés* in French and “MNAs” in English (for “members of the National Assembly”), and that the head of government is called the *premier*. Also find out about the more intricate workings of government, such as the fact that the province is divided into 17 administrative districts and 21 tourist regions. Believe me, this knowledge will come in handy some day.

Rule #3: Know the Political Culture

Quebec is like a nation within a nation, a land of divided loyalties. Most French speakers view themselves as Quebecers first and Canadians second. Some advocate outright independence, while others are fiercely devoted to Canada. This is a minefield for translators.

If you do not know about Quebec’s political culture, you may not realize

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that the adjective “*national*” is often used to refer to the province, not the country. Or that the words Canada and Canadian are used with circumspection in French-language marketing materials, so as not to ruffle feathers. In English Canada, for example, Canadian cheeses are proudly marketed to consumers as “Canadian cheeses,” whereas in Quebec they are called *fromages d’ici* (“cheese from here”), thereby deftly avoiding both the words Canada and Quebec.

Rule #4: Know the Language Law

There is a law that declares French to be the sole official language of Quebec. It is commonly referred to in English as Bill 101. This law decrees that the government must operate only in French, that all names of government agencies and departments must remain in French, and that any private businesses that employ 50 people or more must obtain “certificates of francization” proving that they operate in French. It also decrees that all non-Canadians—including English-speaking Americans—must send their children to French school.¹ The law applies on an institutional level (business, government), but not on an individual level. You may speak and use any language you wish as a private citizen, and all your dealings with the government and court system may be in English.

Translators need to know when and how this law applies. For instance, it does not apply to Quebec’s parliament, the National Assembly, which

is officially bilingual under Canada’s constitution. Nor does it apply to federal government institutions, nor to such things as job titles or program names. If unsure, inquire.

Let me offer you some advice:

- Keep official names and place names in French when translating for the Quebec government.
- Anglicize for business clients, particularly place names.
- Anglicize official names if this helps the reader understand what is being discussed.
- Keep place names in French for tourism clients.
- Keep addresses in French unless translating for an old-stock English Montreal audience.

Rule #5: Know Popular Culture

An arts and entertainment reporter for Canada’s flagship newspaper, *The Globe & Mail*, once reviewed an outdoor concert in Quebec City. It was some obscure band of which he had never heard, so he was surprised when 20,000 people showed up. And he was flabbergasted when everybody started singing along, as if he were the butt of some giant practical joke, à la Black Eyed Peas and Oprah.

He learned that day that Quebec is not only a linguistic island unto itself, but also a cultural island. You can be a megastar in Quebec, with ➡

paparazzi camped outside your home, and still be a nobody everywhere else, even in the rest of Canada.

To be a good translator, you must be up to date on local culture. Fortunately, this is easier to do today than in years past. If you want to work for Canadian and Quebec clients, you should be reading the press, watching television, and following the cultural scene, all of which are conveniently delivered to your computer via the Internet.

Rule #6: Know Canadian English

There are not many differences between American and Canadian English, but there are some. Wikipedia is a good source of examples. One of the major differences is spelling: Canadian English has kept certain vestiges of British spelling such as centre, travelling, manoeuvre, and jewellery.

The important point when translating for a Quebec or Canadian client is to decide which spelling to use. Some clients have very strong preferences, so you should inquire. Your Canadian client may also wish to address an American audience, in which case U.S. spelling may be appropriate.

Rule #7: Know Quebec French

Make no mistake about it: the language spoken in Quebec is French. It is not some offshoot of French all mixed in with aboriginal tongues, but authentic French handed down from the royal courts of France. The big difference is the accent. There was a marked change in pronunciation in France after the Revolution, but Quebec was already in British hands and cut off from the mother country, so it did not follow suit.

Despite this authenticity, there are subtleties you must learn to translate for Quebec. For instance, some French words have different meanings in Quebec: *plusieurs* almost always

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means “many,” whereas in France it means “several”; *déjeuner* means “breakfast” in Quebec but “lunch” in France. Some expressions are unique to Quebec and quite puzzling to outsiders, such as *c’est de valeur*, which looks like it means “that’s valuable,” but which in fact means “that’s too bad.”

Anglicisms: Another source of confusion is anglicisms, which are different depending on which side of the Atlantic you call home. Quebecers are quite sensitive about anglicisms and fight them with a collective zeal that never ceases to amaze the French. They were the ones who refused to say “e-mail” (or *mél* as is now heard in France), but instead coined the word *courriel*, an abbreviation of *courrier électronique*. They were also the inventors of *clavarder* (a mixture of *clavier*, or keyboard, and *bavarder*, to chat), which is now sometimes used to refer to online chatting. The French, on the other hand, use English for its snob appeal and feel absolutely unthreatened by it. Recently, columnist Josée Blanchette in Montreal’s daily *Le Devoir* mocked a promotional text from France that read, *la plus crazy tendance, qui plus est à fort potentiel fun pour une beach-fitness décalée. C’est quoi ‘l’idée’? Une planche de surf sur laquelle on ne surfe pas. Waou, trop déjà, le very concept!* (Put that in Google Translate and see what comes out!)

So beware: French speakers in Quebec do not like anglicisms. This

does not mean their French is not riddled with them, only that they disguise them. For instance, *éventuellement* means “possibly,” but Quebecers often use it to mean “eventually.” Likewise, the French word *charge* means “load” in English, but Quebecers sometimes use it to mean “charge.” And so on.

Syntax: Sentence syntax is often heavily influenced by English in Quebec. When Quebecers say *lundi le 5 décembre* they do not realize that they are mimicking English word order (Monday, the fifth of December) and that they should be saying *le lundi 5 décembre* (the Monday fifth of December). This does not mean that translators must do the same, only that Quebecers may criticize them for vocabulary choices, but not even realize that their own sentence structures are faulty.

If you are a French translator from outside Quebec, pair up with a French translator from inside Quebec and read each other’s work. You will be able to alert your Quebec colleague to strange syntax and disguised anglicisms while your Quebec colleague will be able to point out expressions that do not pass muster in Quebec (such as *traducteur freelance*).

Word Choice: Some common French words are little used in Quebec, and vice versa. For instance, Quebecers do not hesitate to use the verb *pérenniser* (“to perpetuate”), but they almost never use the adjective *pérenne*. They also avoid *fédérateur*, preferring to say

rassembleur. You will also almost never hear *pôle de compétitivité* or *pénibilité*.

Political Correctness: The rules of political correctness can differ. Quebecers have feminized job titles for years, whereas France has only just begun. We once had a freelance translator do a big job that contained long lists of ministers' and deputy ministers' names and titles, and she kept every woman's title in its masculine form (*Madame le ministre* instead of *Madame la ministre*). This is a faux pas in Quebec, so we painstakingly changed every one—and never contacted the translator again to offer her more work.

Capitalization: Another major difference is capitalization. Quebecers are much more fastidious over the use of capitals, which are treated like rare and precious objects to be placed sparingly throughout one's text. Putting a capital on a French word simply because you think it is important is bound to irritate your Quebec client if the rules do not call for one.

Rule #8: Go for a Visit

If you are serious about translating for Quebec clients, heed this word of advice: go for a visit. Get a sense of the place. Get a sense of its history, its culture, its concerns. Make friends. This is good advice for any language group. The more at home you feel with your client's language and culture, the better work you will do.

Note

1. For more information on Bill 101: www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/bill-101.

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Additional Resources for Translators Planning to Tap into the Quebec Market

August 19-22, 2012

Translate in the Townships
3rd International English–French
Conference on Style in Translation
Orford, Quebec

translateinthetownships.com (English)
ontraduitdanslestrie.com (French)

This successor event to the "Translate in the Catskills" workshops in August 2009 and 2011 will bring together some of Europe and America's top trainers in English and French translation to offer two full days of hands-on training sessions in a resort-like setting.

Ordre des traducteurs,
terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec
www.ottiaq.org

Language Industry Association/Association
de l'industrie de la langue
www.ailia.ca

Termium
www.termiumplus.gc.ca

Translation Bureau
www.btb.gc.ca