

**Anglo-Saxon Attitudes
or the Reception of English translations in Quebec
by Betty Howell, C.Tr.**

Since I have yet to meet a French to English translator in Québec who boasts of having read "Beowulf" in the original, I am sure I can be forgiven the surprise I felt the first time I was told by French speakers that I use an Anglo-Saxon approach to translation. Clearly, those who use this adjective, especially when discussing my English word choices, mean something other than "an early form of the English language that was spoken and written in parts of what are now England and south-eastern Scotland between at least the mid-5th century and the mid-12th century" [Wikipedia] when they detect Anglo-Saxon attitudes in the result.

No, when they describe the cultural framework they see embodied in the English translation as Anglo-Saxon, they must mean something else, something obviously different from what they consider the French approach to language. While coping with this perspective quickly becomes instinctive to English translators in Québec, it might be helpful to examine some of its components in greater detail because they reveal a few of the obstacles to communication perceived by those who pay for the translation (who, not incidentally, are not those to whom the translation is addressed).

First of all, it may not be unreasonable to substitute the word "pragmatic" for "Anglo-Saxon" in this context. English translators generally devote their energies to expressing a French message in English as simply and directly as the context allows. We like to get to the heart of the matter, with words of one syllable and as few titles as possible. We like to make clear just what we expect of the recipient of a business letter for example, translating a *Veuillez agréer* phrase into a "I hope to hear from you," or "Thank you for giving this matter your attention" or whatever we think the letter is supposed to achieve, rather than trusting that recipients can read between the lines well enough to know what to they are expected to do next.

A second synonym for Anglo-Saxon in this context might be "concise." After all, it is not just repeated articles and prepositions that make French texts longer than their English translations. We were taught in school to find the least convoluted way of expressing ourselves. "Being wordy" is, after all, a criticism for wasting words, not praise for having a large vocabulary.

Another unconscious synonym for Anglo-Saxon might be "modest." After all, Britain in the Early Middle Ages did not have a culture with claims for greatness, and most English translators don't consider what we do to play a vital role in assuring the survival of English. While we all strive to write well, we don't want the translation to call attention to itself, not even for its purity of language or excellence of style. We want it to serve its purpose – which, more often than not, we have to guess.

It has been my experience that there are a few French clients who consider our work, like our language, to be rather low on the culture scale and assume that any references they

don't recognize must be references to TV sitcoms or rock lyrics, rather than Shakespeare or speeches by FDR. An experienced translator should be expected to know what cultural references will be readily familiar to the intended audience, and this specialized knowledge is at least as important as correct grammar and spelling (and much less likely to be proposed by a translation memory system) in creating a quality translation. Yet often enough, attempts to use idiomatic English style or more sophisticated English vocabulary are met with surprise, followed by the question of why we would use English words or expressions the client doesn't know.

The admirable professional status (and rates) for all translation in Québec undoubtedly reflect the status of the 90% of translators who work into French. English translators are fortunate to be able to ride on their coattails, because for at least some of our clients, allowing the use of English is at best a necessary evil and at worst a sign of cultural surrender. There are people who see English translation for use in the province as a concession forced on them by history, not a free choice made in order to reach a larger audience. Rather than embracing the other insights (and markets) made possible by two languages, they would like to pretend that the other language doesn't really exist – or at least, that it doesn't really matter. Rather than expressing an interest in English Canadian culture (whose existence they tend to deny), they prefer to denigrate it by calling it “Anglo-Saxon.”

Given that everything in Quebec (Québec?) is political, from street names to education policy by way of when to include accented letters, French to English translators cannot afford to ignore how their work is received by those who pay for it. There is no single, ideal translation of any text at any moment in history, merely some correct ones that better fulfill their purpose than others. Translators everywhere have to satisfy that two-headed monster: the buyer and the reader. What makes translating French into English in Quebec especially challenging is that the translation has to satisfy both native speakers and those who are not but, because they may know the subject matter better than most native speakers, also imagine they know the language better. I am infinitely grateful to the clients who read my translations and ask why something has been expressed in a way they would not have expected -- and somewhat less grateful to those (fortunately far fewer) who expect a mirror image of the original, down to expecting the same number of occurrences for a word in both languages, if the translation is to be "faithful and accurate."

This probably does not mean that we should adopt Anglo-Saxon attitudes in dress, alliterative poetry and burial practices – but I nevertheless think we should persist in the application of the virtues that this special use of “Anglo-Saxon” refers to: pragmatism, succinctness and modesty.

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