

The Northwest Territories Interpreter Corps

Donna Laing



Interpreter/translators Josie Tucktoo (left) and Juliana Boychuck at work inside the sound-proof interpreter's booth during a recent session. (Bob Wilson, Department of Information, NWT)

At the best of times simultaneous interpretation of parliamentary debates is a difficult job. Canada is well-known for expertise in this area but its reputation is based almost entirely on the simultaneous interpretation division of the House of Commons. How many Canadians realize that the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories provides simultaneous translation of English into Inuktitut and vice versa? In this article the author outlines the origins and operation of this little-known service.

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The Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories is in session. The Speaker recognizes the member from Foxe Basin, Mark Evaluarjuk, who rises and begins to speak: "Uqagti, uqausiqarumavunga nannuqitiksakkannirnik. . ."

From the interpreter's booth, a voice translates the speech into English: "Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak on the matter of polar bear quotas. . ."

This interpreting service, unique in North America, has been provided to members of the Legislative Assembly by the Northwest

Territories Interpreter Corps since 1974. The Interpreter Corps was formed in 1973 when it was recognized that some means would have to be found to overcome language barriers between a predominantly English-speaking government and people who were unilingual in one of the native languages of the NWT. The task of improving communications was given to the Territorial Government's Department of Information.

Nine recruits, representing the Dene (Indian) languages and two main Inuit dialects, were selected to undergo a nine-month training course. The training focussed on government structure, programs and objectives, linguistic and translation skills and public speaking. After completing their training, members of the Corps began work in various centres across the north.

In 1975, when nine native members were elected to the fifteen member council, there was an urgent need to provide English-Inuktitut translations during sessions of the Territorial Council.

The Interpreter Corps was asked to provide simultaneous interpreting because it was thought consecutive interpreting would be too slow. An experiment at first, simultaneous interpreting is now used for all sessions of the Legislative Assembly, most committee meetings and many conferences.

The council expanded to a twenty-two member Legislative Assembly in 1979 with eleven English-speaking members and five unilingual Inuktitut-speaking members. Six MLAs are bilingual in English and one of the native languages.

About one-third of the time, the language spoken on the floor is Inuktitut, so the demand for English-Inuktitut interpreters and translators is heaviest. Although none of the native languages of the NWT have the status of an official language, practicality demands that interpretation and translation be provided to allow unilingual members to participate effectively in the decision-making process.

The Corps usually has between 10 and 15 members. Approximately half of these are trainees learning through a combination of on-the-job training and workshops up to three weeks long. Students are tested at the end of their year-long training and, if successful, are certified and offered permanent positions as members of the Interpreter Corps.

During a session, six senior interpreter/translators are required. Four to six trainees are responsible for the day-to-day translation needs of the Assembly. Their work is monitored by one or two of the senior people. The Corps is occasionally assisted by two or three interpreter/translators hired on contract during Assembly sessions.

There are two major differences between the functions of the NWT Corps members and those of their southern counterparts. Corps members are expected to provide both written and verbal translations and to work not only in their mother tongue but also in English.

The Territorial government has recently approved a plan to expand its Dene language interpreter and translation services. The

Department of Information plans to form a Corps of eight interpreters and support staff to work in the Dene languages of the Mackenzie Valley, including Loucheux, Slavey, Dogrib and Chipewyan.

Equipment and Other Problems

In the north, developing the equipment required to deliver even the most basic service has taken time. A portable, "sound-proof" interpreter's booth of padded Egyptian cotton was developed. It looked very attractive but in fact the interpreter's voice could be overheard by anyone standing near the booth. This booth was lost somewhere between Yellowknife and a regional interpreting assignment. It is believed that some enterprising person saw its possibilities as an ice fishing shelter. Perhaps it was better suited to that purpose!

The Interpreter Corps uses its own portable interpreting system for caucus and committee meetings. Another larger, more elaborate system is used during Assembly debates. Since two sessions of the Assembly each year are usually held outside Yellowknife (to acquaint people with the operation of the Legislative Assembly), a great deal of preparation is required for these sittings. Planes transporting MLAs, support staff and interpreters are loaded to the cockpit with everything from sound systems to xerox machines.

The development of professional interpreting and translating is also frustrated by the lack of Inuktitut/English equivalents. Groups of interpreter/translators from Labrador, Northern Quebec and the NWT meet regularly to attempt to define new terms and find equivalents. Many items known until recently only in Southern Canada do not have equivalents in the North. They are usually described in terms people in the north would recognize. The Inuktitut translation for "chicken", for instance, would be "like a big ptarmigan". Another difficulty which is gradually becoming less troublesome is the traditional differences in dialects spoken from one region to another. Training, travel and experience are slowly overcoming this problem.

The popularity of English-Inuktitut simultaneous interpreting has been spreading across the circumpolar regions. In 1979, Inuit delegates from Greenland and Alaska heard simultaneous interpreting for the first time at the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in Greenland. Since then, there has been a great deal of interest in developing a comparable service in these countries. Alaska, in particular, has been drawing on the experience of the NWT Corps to set up their own training program.

Northern Diplomacy

It is often difficult to interpret jokes effectively. After many struggles to interpret jokes where the humour fell flat, one enterprising interpreter finally hit on the technique of explaining to the Inuit listeners: "He's telling a joke now; We should all laugh". The speaker and guests were both relieved by this strategy — the speaker, because his humour was apparently being appreciated, and the audience because they were spared from embarrassing the speaker.