

# Language and Parliament: We are not Alone

Brooke Jeffrey

**A**n expert recently estimated the number of living languages and dialects in the world to be roughly two thousand; since there are only some one hundred and thirty odd countries in which to accommodate these languages somebody clearly is bound to have a problem. Therefore it is not surprising to learn that in most countries of two or more linguistic groups, language has proven to be a highly political issue. The question of whether there should be an "official" language, or two or more, has invariably arisen during the promulgation of a nation's constitution. An analysis of provisions regarding the language spoken by parliamentarians, and the language of official parliamentary documents, provides valuable insight into the actual status of official languages in other states. At the same time it can serve as a useful measuring stick for Canadian parliamentary practices with respect to official languages. This article looks at official language legislation and parliamentary practice in both Commonwealth and non Commonwealth countries.

The question of language has always been a key political issue in this country, but, there are many countries whose linguistic problems are more complex than Canada's. A large number of former colonies in Africa and Asia possess a multitude of regional languages or dialects but no common unifying language except that of their colonizers. Many finally solved the dilemma of competing regional interests by choosing the colonial language as the "official" language, while some such as Kenya opted, in addition, for a non-regional but non-indigenous *lingua franca* such as Swahili. (Originally the method of communication among African traders, Swahili is not really a language but a combination of several, similar in many respects to Esperanto.) Others decided, for political reasons, to adopt more than one "official" language or a combination of official and "national" languages. This has also been done in various European states which have a traditional multilingual population.

The sanctioning of an official language may or may not have any practical consequences. But in addition to constitutional guarantees, (or sometimes as an alternative to them) a number of countries have introduced comprehensive legislation protecting linguistic minorities with respect to education or government ser-

vices. When only these countries with substantial official language provisions are considered, the proportion of multilingual countries in the sample decreases but nevertheless remains significant (at almost 50%). Interestingly one also finds that approximately 65% of these countries are former British colonies, most of which are still part of the Commonwealth and possess parliamentary systems similar to ours. Of the twenty states examined below, only ten (including Canada) are bilingual; the rest must deal with situations in which three or more languages prevail.

A great deal has been written concerning the public service and educational provisions of legislation in some of these countries — generally those which have appeared to be the most successful and/or potentially applicable to the Canadian context. However, while most of these states have also made provision for a visible

TABLE 1

Bilingual		Multilingual
Bangladesh* (English	Ben-gali)	Czechoslovakia (Czech, Slovak, and several minority languages)
Belgium (French	Flemish)	Fiji* (Fijian, English, Hindustani)
Canada* (English	French)	India* (Hindi, English, 15 regional dialects)
Finland (Finish	Swedish)	Nigeria* (English, Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba)
Ireland** (English	Irish)	Romania (several regional languages)
Kenya* (English	Swahili)	Singapore* (Malay, Chinese, Tamil, English)
Israel (Hebrew	Arabic)	Sri Lanka* (Sinhala, Tamil, English)
Malta* (English	Maltese)	Switzerland (French, German, Italian)
Malaysia* (Malay	English)	U.S.S.R. (many regional languages)
South Africa** (English	Afrikaans)	Yugoslavia (Serbo-Croatian, Croato-Serbian, Slovenian, Macedonian)

\* Member of the Commonwealth

\*\* Former British colony

Brooke Jeffrey is a political scientist in the Political and Social Affairs Division of the Research Branch, Library of Parliament.

and symbolically important affirmation of the status of their respective official languages in the functioning of their parliamentary forum, surprisingly little has been written on this very important aspect of official language policy.

The areas of legislative procedure which can be evaluated in terms of language policy fall under two general headings — parliamentary debate and publications. Debates include the languages Members use in speaking; the provision of simultaneous translation and the provision of transcripts of debates. Publications include committee proceedings and reports, other documents, including internal administration and legislation.

No two countries examined follow exactly the same procedure in the application of their official languages policy to the parliamentary forum. In fact, there are almost as many solutions as there are languages! While in some of these countries minority languages are used extensively, in others their use is restricted to specific areas. Some countries have in fact been chosen deliberately to demonstrate the extremes. While this makes generalizations somewhat difficult there do appear to be certain trends, or perhaps more accurately two or three different approaches to the issue of linguistic expression in the legislative branch of government, which become evident after careful study.

For example, regardless of the formal status of the languages in the countries considered — constitutionally entrenched official languages, legislated official languages and/or national languages or merely commonly recognized national and regional languages — virtually all of them provide for members to speak in Parliament in whichever of these languages they choose. In ten countries members may speak in either of two official or national languages, (Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Finland, South Africa, Malta, Malaysia, Israel, Kenya, New Zealand and Ireland), in Switzerland, Fiji and Sri Lanka in any of three languages, and in the seven remaining countries members may choose to speak in some four to fifteen different languages or dialects. The consensus seems to be that this is the most important aspect of a state's language policy with respect to parliamentary procedure, no doubt because of the attendant high visibility. However, even here, there is a wide variation in practice. There is often a considerable divergence between what is permitted and the actual usage of approved languages. In reality, examples range all the way from New Zealand, where the right to express oneself in Maori is virtually never exercised, to the cases of Switzerland, Yugoslavia and India, where several languages are regularly used in parliamentary debate.

The situation with regard to simultaneous translation is more complex. Since roughly half of the countries provide this, while the other half do not, there is obviously no consensus on the necessity or desirability of this service. Moreover among those states which do have simultaneous translation for their parliamentary debates, several only do so for certain languages, (e.g., Switzerland — German and French but not Italian) or in one direction but not the other (e.g., Israel — Arabic to Hebrew only). Among those countries which do not provide this service the most common explanation is that it is not necessary. In Kenya and South Africa, for example, it is argued that all Members understand both official languages. On the other hand in Nigeria, where English is the national language, members may express themselves or table

motions in Hausa, Ibo or Yoruba (the regional languages) if they are unable to do so in English, but technical and economic considerations have so far prohibited the establishment of interpretation and translation services.

The question of verbatim transcripts of debates (*Hansard*) is closely related to that of simultaneous translation, although there are exceptions. Generally speaking, those countries which do not provide a simultaneous translation service only publish their *Hansard* or its equivalent in one language. (For example in Nigeria, Kenya and New Zealand the debates are in English only, while in Malta they are in Maltese only.) However both South Africa and Czechoslovakia, which also have no translation services, publish their debates in both languages while Israel, which does provide simultaneous translation, publishes its debates in Hebrew only.

Furthermore, among those states which provide for *Hansard* in more than one language there is a clear distinction between two very different approaches. Canada, along with South Africa, Yugoslavia, Malaysia and Singapore, prints reports separately in each of the official languages, translations being given from speeches in the other languages. By contrast in Finland, Sri Lanka, Ireland, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and Belgium speeches are published in a single report in the language in which they are delivered. (But additionally in Finland and Belgium a short résumé is published in both languages.)

Turning next to the official publication categories, one finds that in almost every case both committee proceedings/reports and internal administrative documents follow the lead of the procedure for printing the debates in that country. However in some countries the third category of publications, formal legislation, appears to be entirely another matter. For example in Malta and Kenya, where transcripts, documents, etc. are published in English only, final legislation is nevertheless available in Maltese in the first instance and, as much as is practicable, in Swahili in the second, while in Switzerland legislation is available not only in French and German but also in Italian (the third official language) and Romansch (a recognized national language). Conversely in Finland legislation is almost exclusively in Finnish only; it is available in Swedish only in certain instances where the subject matter warrants.

In Table 2 below, these three categories as well as those related to the debates are outlined in more detail for each of the countries examined.

Of course the well-known practical implications and problems of official languages policy in public sector administration apply equally to parliamentary forums. Simultaneous translation and the translation of official documents are costly affairs which require a substantial permanent staff of highly trained personnel. These are additional steps in a process already perceived by many to be slow and laborious. In developing countries, as was demonstrated earlier in the context of Nigeria's lack of simultaneous translation, the economic costs and lack of trained personnel often make such services prohibitive.

But even in Canada, where the right of Members to use either French or English in the debates of Parliament was constitutionally guaranteed at the time of Confederation, it was not until 1958 that a resolution was adopted providing for simultaneous translation in the House. The first session of the House of Com-

TABLE 2

Country	Members Speaking in Debates	Simultaneous Translation	Transcript of Debates (Hansard)	Committee Reports	Internal Administrative Documents	Legislation
Belgium	Flemish, French	Yes	lang. of speaker	Flemish, French	Flemish, French	Flemish, French
Canada	English, French	Yes	English, French	English, French	English, French	English, French
Czechoslovakia	Czech, Slovak or National Minority Lang.	No	lang. of speaker	Czech, Slovak	Czech, Slovak	Czech, Slovak
Fiji	English, Fijian, Hindustani	No (but projected)	English only	English	English	English
Finland	Finnish, Swedish	No	lang. of speaker	Finnish summary in Swedish	Finnish	Finnish some Swedish
India	Hindi, English, 15 regional languages	Yes	Hindi, English	Hindi, English	Hindi, English	Hindi, English
Ireland	English, Irish	Irish to English only	lang. of speaker	English, Irish	English, Irish	English, Irish
Israel	Hebrew, Arabic	Arabic to Hebrew only	Hebrew only	Hebrew	Hebrew	Hebrew
Kenya	English, Swahili	No	English only	English	English	English, some Swahili
Malaysia	Malay, English	Yes	Malay, English	Malay, English	Malay, English	Malay, English
Malta	Maltese, English	No	Maltese only	Maltese	Maltese	Maltese, English
New Zealand	English, Maori	No	English only	English	English	English
Nigeria	English, Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba	No	English only	English	English	—
Singapore	Tamil, English, Malay, Chinese	Yes	all 4 langs.	all 4 langs.	all 4 langs.	—
South Africa	English, Afrikaans	No	English, Afrikaans	English, Afrikaans	English, Afrikaans	—
Sri Lanka	Sinhala, Tamil, English	Yes	lang. of the speaker	Sinhala, Tamil, English	Sinhala, Tamil, English	Sinhala, Tamil, English
Switzerland	German, French, Italian	German, French	lang. of the speaker	German, French	German, French, Italian, Romansch	German, French, Italian, Romansch
Yugoslavia	Any of 4 official langs. or National Minority Langs.	Yes	several — 1 for each language	all langs.	4 official languages	4 official languages

mons to be translated took place January 16, 1959. The first debate in the Senate to be interpreted did not occur until September 14, 1961. The original staff consisted of a total of seven translator-interpreters.

Since then linguistic services provided for Canadian parliamentarians have expanded considerably. Currently thirteen interpreters provide simultaneous translation for debates in the House of Commons and Senate, while forty translator-interpreters also work for the committees of both Houses. In addition the Secretary of State's Translation Bureau has established a special parliamentary translation branch with a staff of 75 translators to handle the translation of all other committee, research and administrative documentation for Parliament. For the fiscal year 1980-81 the interpretation budget was approximately \$1.5 million while the translation budget approached \$3 million (including free-lance contract work).

By contrast in Belgium, which is often considered to be one of the most advanced multilingual countries in terms of services,

four interpreters were employed in 1980 (as non-permanent staff) to provide simultaneous translation of all sessions and committee meetings. At that time a total of twenty translators were also employed, (as permanent staff) of which 11 worked exclusively with bills, amendments and committee reports while nine handled all summary reports and written questions.

Unfortunately precise budgetary figures for Belgian linguistic services are not available at this time, and similar administrative data for the other countries examined is practically non-existent. This is a fruitful area for further investigation, particularly with respect to those countries (such as Switzerland, India, Singapore, Sri Lanka and South Africa) which appear from this analysis to provide a similar range of linguistic services to parliamentarians. However, it is possible to conclude from the material already assembled that Canada is certainly within the mainstream of parliamentary procedure for countries with official language policies, and may well be in the forefront with regard to the financing and administration of such policies in the parliamentary forum.