**Globally Speaking**

**Podcast 61 Transcript**

**A Peek Inside the Canadian Translation Bureau**

**Featuring Stéphan Déry, CEO of the Canadian Translation Bureau**

Renato I’m Renato Beninatto.

Michael And I’m Michael Stevens.

Renato Today on Globally Speaking, we’re talking with the president of the Translation Bureau in Canada. It’s a part of the Canadian Government even though it has its own budget, it’s independent, it’s a self-sustaining agency. But it’s in charge of doing all the official translations for the Canadian Government.

Michael The Bureau is doing massive amounts of translation work and before this interview I knew very little of them, so I think our listeners are going to learn a lot.

Renato Let’s listen from our guest.

Stéphan My name is Stéphan Déry. I’m the Chief Executive Officer of the Translation Bureau. I joined the Bureau a little bit more than a year ago, and I think I joined the Bureau at the most interesting phase of the translation industry.

Renato Tell us a little bit about what is the Translation Bureau in Canada. I don’t think there is anything similar in the world.

Stéphan The father of our current prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, introduced the Official Languages Act in 1969. Canadians have the right to request services of equal quality in French or English from the government of Canada. It’s for all civil servants also. Imagine you work in the federal government and you’re an Anglophone; you can request that your employer, your supervisor, speak to you in the language of your choice.

All of this created a language industry in Canada, so the two founding cultures of Canada, French and English, are recognizing the right of each other to have services in their own language.

The content of all federal departments, organizations, agencies, needs to be of equal quality in French and English if it’s to be used by the public. We’re talking here about co-creation instead of translation. You could read the other language and have the same feeling, the same understanding, so it has the same meaning.

Imagine all the federal court rulings must be translated from either French to English or from English to French. We’re talking about close to anywhere from 10 to 15 million words a year that need to be translated. And then, if it’s translated from English to French, the French could be used in any court in the country, so it has to have exactly the same meaning as the original document.

Michael This sounds like quite a boom for the translation industry. What is it that the average citizen gains from this?

Stéphan There are Francophones across the country who don’t necessarily speak English, but they received a service from their government in their native language. It puts everybody, English or French, on the same level, getting the same level of service from their government.

Renato And what is the business structure of the Translation Bureau? Is it an agency, is it a department, is it a separate company? How is it funded also?

Stéphan I’ll go back to the 1920s. The Translation Bureau doesn’t exist. They decided “we need to translate” because a lot of the people didn’t speak French, so there needed to be translated documents, they needed to have interpreters. At that time, they started the translation industry in Canada. In 1932, they created the Translation Bureau because they needed to standardize terminology. You have all these translators working across the government translating documentation, law, documents for newspapers, speeches from Ministers…they needed to standardize because everybody was using their own terminology from anywhere. They created the Translation Bureau to ensure that the translators had all the same qualifications and were using the same wording, the same terminology. We’re going back over 80 years ago.

From there, the Translation Bureau was part of the government, was funded through a budget, and every year we spent that budget and lived within these means. Up to 1969, that continued. Then the Official Languages Act came, and all of a sudden this was an obligation for all departments to translate in French or in English depending on the source document.

And then the costs of translation exploded, and obviously there were more and more translators being hired by the federal government. If you wanted to become a translator, the government was paying all your education: you go to university, you get your Bachelor’s in Translation, you come back, you have a full-time job with the Translation Bureau.

This continued until about 1993 where, in an effort to gain efficiency, the government decided to make the Translation Bureau a special operating agency reporting to a Deputy Minister. The Translation Bureau became part of the government of Canada. Our translators are still employees of the government of Canada. We negotiate year after year with departments to do their translation with them. We’re the sole in-house translation provider for the government of Canada.

We have the linguistic portal of Canada, available around the world, which is used as linguistic tools for people to write in French or in English, and also something you may know which is called Termium Plus, which records over three million hits a month from around 220 countries around the world.

Renato Termium is one of the best terminology tools available, right?

Stéphan Exactly. These tools were built by the government of Canada to ensure that Canadians have access to information. Termium at one point was only for translators. Now, it’s publicly available for free to everybody.

We even have an act that mandates us to provide translation, terminology and interpretation services in both official languages to the Canadian federal government, but also to parliament. Every time there’s a committee in parliament, all documentation has to be translated.

Michael How many words are processed? How many people do you have involved at the Bureau?

Stéphan We translate, on average, 350 million words per year, provide approximately 10,500 interpretation days, 4,500 hours of closed captioning to parliament, and we’re responsible for all accessibility, so 7,200 hours of visual interpretation for hard of hearing every year.

In addition to that, we employ approximately 1,200 people, which makes us one of the largest employers of translators in the world.

We have service 24/7. We’ll get, as an example, multiple secret documents on a Friday night that need to be ready for a Monday night. Think about the defense: our military needs to take action and they need translated documents; we’re there for them 24/7.

Renato Military intelligence, secret service, that kind of stuff doesn’t involve only English and French. Do you also work with other languages and do you work with private companies to help you deliver all this volume that you have to handle?

Stéphan Absolutely, yes to both of your questions. With a business volume that fluctuates like that, we have to rely also on the private sector. For forty percent of our business volume, we partner with the private sector to be able to deliver to government.

The Translation Bureau concentrates on secret documents or highly classified documents, and we retain the service of private sector freelancers or small or larger companies to help us with the demand that comes from the government.

The Translation Bureau works in about 100 languages—translation and interpretation. Obviously, we don’t have all this capacity in-house because the demand is quite volatile. We have internal staff that translate in about 40 languages and we rely on the private sector to translate in more than 100 languages.

The same goes for interpretation. We have a staff of about 75 to 80 interpreters that are assigned to parliament on a full-time basis. But when there’s a requirement, as an example, the G7 that just happened in Quebec in early June, we had 45 interpreters from 10 different countries joining us. We put the team together and we provided the service to all the officials that were there for this event.

Renato What is the relationship of the Translation Bureau with native languages in Canada?

Stéphan The Procedure Committee of Parliament looked at introducing indigenous languages into parliament. We’ve been translating into over 90 different dialects and indigenous languages for the government of Canada.

Because the demand was fairly scarce, we didn’t build capacity internally to do that. Again, we’re relying on industry. But since this committee met and heard witness from across the country, they’ve decided to open parliament to have indigenous speakers that could speak indigenous languages.

Because we believe there’s going to be a continuous increase in the request for indigenous languages, we’re building relationships with communities and trying to develop the interpreter and translator roles in those communities, so that we have a greater pool to draw from when these requests will become weekly or monthly. To date, it represents only 0.5% of our translation and interpretation requests.

I believe that with what the parliament is starting to do here in Canada, it will help these languages be preserved because, as I said, there’s over 90 different indigenous languages and dialects in Canada, and the Translation Bureau would be more than happy to help preserve these languages by helping to either build an industry or build the capacity to have community interpreters.

Renato Do you have counterparts at the provincial level? Is there a Quebecois Translation Bureau? Is there a British Columbia Translation Bureau? Or do each one of the provinces handle their own local requirements?

Stéphan We have partnerships with a lot of the provincial governments to support each other—Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba—but we normally do not translate for each government. They have their own either internal or a mix of internal translation bureau and private sector.

We have a partnership with Nunavut since 2003 for terminology and training of their translators to help them build a terminology bank. And to date, we have some 2,300 records in Inuktitut in our terminology bank.

If the provincial governments would ask us to help them in translation, we would definitely do so. Together, we work towards the same goal: write better French and English, and in this case, better Inuktitut languages.

Michael As the leader of the Translation Bureau, how do you all stay up to date and relevant, and is machine translation a part of what’s happening now and looking to the future?

Renato You might have opened a can of worms there, Michael [laughs].

Stéphan [Laughs] Oh, not at all. As soon as I came in at the Bureau, about a year ago, in May 2017, one of my first mandates was to listen to employees and draft a new path forward for the Translation Bureau. What I’ve done with my team is basically listen to employees, listen to clients, put those two at the center of our vision, and build four axes as a vision for the Translation Bureau.

One of them is stronger links. One is building capacity. One is a renewed business model, and the fourth one is technology for professional translators.

Michael You guys have some unique use cases that seem like they would be well-applied to this kind of technology.

Stéphan Absolutely. We have to stay aware and to get technology at the forefront of what we’re doing. We’re just on the verge of signing a Memorandum of Understanding, an agreement with Montreal University, to help us with neural machine translation, to work with them to clean up our corpus and to make algorithms that will ensure that the government of Canada corpus of translated text is as clean as possible, so when it feeds the neural machine translation, we have even better results. Faster translation at cheaper prices for our clients.

Michael To be able to have such a great academic community to work with on that is a lovely partnership.

Renato How do you measure your performance?

Stéphan We’re not here to make a profit because we’re a government agency. We’re here to deliver quality products. When I said I put the translator at the center with the client, it is ensuring that our clients receive quality products in French and English.

In Canada we have what we call the official languages commissioner which is the watchdog of the official languages. So if you feel you’re not well-served in one language or the other, you can put a complaint in, the commissioner will review your complaint, do an inquiry and then he’ll make recommendations to the government of Canada.

That’s also a way that the Translation Bureau can measure the quality we provide. Our main target is to produce the highest quality possible for the government of Canada at a reasonable cost.

Michael This has been a great conversation.

Renato Thank you so much, Stephan!

Stephan Thank you very much!