Conference interpretation markets in Canada

Canada has been officially bilingual since the Official Languages Act was passed in 1969. As a result, the bulk of interpretation in Canada takes place in French and English.

Through its Conference Interpretation Services and Parliamentary Interpretation Service, both reporting to the Translation Bureau, the Government of Canada is by far the country's largest interpretation client. Those two organisations combined have approximately 75 staff interpreters and regularly recruit over 150 freelance interpreters.

The Parliamentary Interpretation Service provides interpreters to the House of Commons debates, Senate debates, parliamentary committees, Cabinet meetings and other meetings in the parliamentary sector. As for Conference Interpretation Services, there are two divisions: the Official Languages (English-French) section, and the Foreign Languages section. Conference Interpretation Services assigns teams of interpreters to the many national and international meetings and conferences organised by federal departments and other public bodies.

At the provincial level, Canada’s only officially bilingual province, New Brunswick, also has its own government Interpretation Service. Located in Fredericton, it provides the services of both staff and freelance interpreters to the Legislature and its committees. While they may not be officially bilingual, some other provinces and territories do provide simultaneous interpretation services for proceedings in their respective legislatures. This is the case, for instance, in Ontario, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. In these provinces, interpretation services are offered in both official languages; in the territories, services are provided in aboriginal languages.

Finally, there are also some specialised United Nations organisations located in Canada that recruit staff interpreters as well as freelancers. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) is headquartered in Montreal, as are the offices of the Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Although these two agencies have no staff interpreters, they do call on freelancers as needed for their meetings and conferences.

Because interpretation markets are concentrated mainly in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, most interpreters are located in those three cities. Moreover, most members of AIIC Canada live and work in these three centres as well. Other major conference and meeting destinations are Vancouver, Winnipeg and Halifax. Because of the size of the country, interpreters are frequently called on to travel over long distances to provide their services, for example in remote northern areas such as Iqaluit in the territory of Nunavut and Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories, or from St. John’s, Newfoundland to Victoria, British Columbia.

In the private sector, several interpretation firms have set up shop in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto and
Winnipeg. They offer interpretation services to a broad range of clients such as major corporations, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, official organisations, television networks and professional associations. Other colleagues work as independent consultant interpreters rather than as members of a firm.

Over the past twenty years, conference interpretation in Canada has shown steady growth both in the variety of languages used in conference settings and in the number of new private sector clients joining the ranks of more traditional public sector clients. There is also a constant inflow of new interpreters arriving on the market, many of whom go on to become members of AIIC Canada.

Recommended citation format: