

Everyone Says No: Public Service Broadcasting and the Failure of Translation

By Kyle Conway

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. 217 pp.

ISBN: 9780773539341.

A Book Review by

Michael Varga

University of Ottawa, Canada

Kyle Conway's *Everyone Says No: Public Service Broadcasting and the Failure of Translation* offers an extensive case study of translation on English and French news programs on public television in Canada. Focusing on the debates surrounding the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords—the key attempts undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s to amend the country's constitution to the satisfaction of all its constituent communities—Conway's analysis seeks to demonstrate how the prevailing journalistic translation patterns and techniques (as evidenced on the French-language *Le Téléjournal* and the English-language *The National* news programs) informed about and mediated the constitutional discourses and debates and ultimately contributed to the failure of both accords.

Conway distinguishes two distinct modes of translation: linguistic translation, such as subtitling or voiceovers, to re-express linguistic equivalents in the other language, and cultural translation, which brings to the fore and explains one cultural group's perspective on a given issue to the other group. Nevertheless, while Conway emphasizes translation, he makes it clear that his analysis is primarily intended as a contribution to communications and media studies; as such, he does not set out to explain the failure of the accords; instead he aims to “examine the media's role in an intensely political series of debates” (2011: 8).

His choice to examine only the news programs aired on the CBC and Radio-Canada as opposed to including private network news programs—by his own admission a weakness, as public service programs represent only a fraction of television news programs available to Canadian viewers—is justified by the fact that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has a specific mandate to facilitate and contribute to a shared national consciousness and identity. It is less clear why Conway chose to restrict his media samples to French-language and English-language news programs only. In view of the fact that the Meech Lake Accord was effectively (co-) defeated by a gesture of protest by Aboriginal Elijah Harper in the Manitoba provincial legislature—a bold if effective way of raising awareness that Aboriginal concerns had been sidelined in the Meech Lake Accord—which served to ensure that the interests of Canada's Aboriginal peoples were given greater consideration in the negotiations leading up to the Charlottetown Accord, Conway's corpus could have been broadened and made more diverse—

no doubt at the risk of making even more intricate an already highly complex research structure—if his study had included CBC news programs broadcast in Aboriginal languages.

Based on the circuit models of culture associated with cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Julie D'Acci, Conway's approach focuses on four key components and their points of mutual influence: artefact (the actual news coverage of the debates surrounding the constitutional negotiations, for example), its production, its reception, and its wider socio-cultural context. All four points of the circuit model are explored in depth to show how key elements in the debate, such as the politically charged "société distincte" and "distinct society," presumed to be linguistic equivalents, brought different meanings to the fore, depending on the different meanings the various actors in the debate associated with them. This resulted in the two terms evoking widely different meanings on *Le Téléjournal* and on *The National*, and thus exposed the counterproductive potential of translation as a force that could hamper rather than promote mutual understanding.

In view of the four circuit dimensions and their multiple mutual contact points, especially the complex and varied factors affecting specific socio-cultural contexts, the topics and issues Conway raises are not always easy to re-express beyond their contextual range, and therefore resist straightforward linguistic translation. Conway also demonstrates a range of extra-linguistic factors that prevented public service broadcasters, even when they did resort to translation, from enhancing mutual understanding between both sides of the constitutional divide: differing conceptual notions of journalistic impartiality; different conceptions of "outside" threats (English Canada's concern about being dominated by US-produced news media versus French Canada's fear of being overshadowed by English-Canadian news media); the public service media's reluctance to make greater use of subtitling as a way to challenge viewers' existing assumptions while they make sense of the news; different electoral laws in Quebec and in the rest of Canada—especially during the debates over the Charlottetown Accord, which went to referendum—produced strikingly different campaign dynamics, giving rise to more polarized debates in Québec than in English Canada.

As an illuminating extension to analyzing these media issues, Conway's political analysis offers relevant insights into the respective socio-cultural contexts the CBC and Radio-Canada both reflect and speak to, including the different ideas, values and identity narratives that shape each of two dominant official language communities. Referring to their divergent notions of Canadian history and federalism—the fact that English Canadians tend to emphasize the equality between provinces whereas Quebecers see Québec as home to one of the two "founding peoples"—Conway emphasizes that these different interpretative frameworks will also engender different interpretations and reactions to the same news among viewers of *The National* and *Le Téléjournal*. The wider narrative contexts of each linguistic group thus impose complex challenges on journalists aiming to culturally translate the news so it may preserve its source meaning while also reflecting the prevailing socio-political frameworks in the receiving culture.

Conway succeeds in adeptly and very carefully describing and analyzing the various forces, motions and reasons behind the country's internal misunderstandings. He sheds light on the many neglected aspects of the country's constitutional debates as well as the public media's role in facilitating their failure. Although he stresses that *Everyone Says No* is not intended to make any significant contributions to the field of political science, his thorough research and careful analysis, as well as the chart included in an appendix chronicling the key moments in the history of both constitutional accords, offer relevant insights into how Canada's national discourses evolved over the course of the failed accords.

Everyone Says No: Public Service Broadcasting and the Failure of Translation

If Aboriginal voices helped sink the Meech Lake Accord, their recalcitrance also paved the way for them to sit at the table when the Charlottetown Accord was drawn up. Enhanced public consultations and citizen participation (including democratic sanction—or, as the case turned out to be—rejection by referendum vote) made the Charlottetown Accord a more citizen-focused attempt at national harmonization than the largely government minister- and politician-directed Meech Lake Accord. And *The National*, in the aftermath of the first accord's failure, despite the lingering promotion of counterproductive stereotypes, did also broaden its program offerings of cultural translation to mediate more culturally diverse voices and perspectives. And so in spite of repeated and continuing cuts at the CBC, rapidly altering media landscapes that increasingly challenge the country's national broadcaster's role, and Canada's ever-greater diversity, Conway envisions the potential of enhanced cultural translation as an apt way for Canada's increasingly diverse communities to explain themselves to one another, to combat exclusion, and therefore contribute to national cohesion: "translation can make diversity available at a central point, thus overcoming objections raised by both camps" (2011: 166).

About the Reviewer

Michael Varga is a Ph.D. student in translation studies at the University of Ottawa's School of Translation and Interpretation. He spent ten years teaching languages in Japan, Canada, Vietnam, and Hong Kong. He authored short fiction and non-fiction articles, and co-translated a series of French-language history textbooks for use in Québec's English-language secondary schools. His current research seeks to explore alternative models of literary translation that extend beyond the imagination-restricting binary paradigms around which much translation is organized.

Citing this book review:

Varga, Michael. (2012). [Review of the book *Everyone says no: Public service broadcasting and the failure of translation*]. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 5(1), 123-125.