



STEVEN DARBY

# BEST PRACTICES IN BILINGUAL EXHIBITION TEXT LESSONS FROM A BILINGUAL MUSEUM

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(opposite page)

The large cutout letters in this view from the Terry Fox exhibition work for titles in one bilingual word as well as for translated titles in two separate languages. The angle on the “E” represents the accented letter “É” in French.

## Words are powerful, and conveying their power is especially challenging when an exhibition requires two languages—or more.

At the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), we regularly present text in two languages. In addition to enhancing accessibility and inclusivity, this practice improves the quality of the visitor experience. First, it requires us to think hard about the key messages we wish to convey, as there is limited space for each language. Second, the multistep process involved in developing text in a second language—which requires intense scrutiny and reflection—consistently improves the quality of the text in *both* languages.

Over the years, the CHM has developed, tested, and refined its text-development process and graphic design standards—both for exhibitions developed in house, and for borrowed unilingual exhibitions adapted to a bilingual presentation. Given this experience, our methodologies and standards may prove helpful for any museum planning to work in more than one language.

### A Bilingual Context

The CMH is Canada’s national museum of human history. It is located in Gatineau, Quebec, across a river

from Canada’s capital, Ottawa, in the National Capital Region. The museum welcomes an average of 1.3 million local, regional, national, and international visitors each year. Fifty-one percent of our visitors self-describe as English speaking, 23 percent as French speaking, and 18 percent as both English and French speaking. Ten percent speak other languages.

As a Crown corporation in an officially bilingual country, the CHM is required through the Official Languages Act to provide all of its services—both written and verbal—in Canada’s two official languages: English and French. We are required to present *all* text in both languages, and texts must be the same in size and visual weight. We present the French language first in all contexts, because we are located in the province of Quebec, where the primary language is French. For printed text, this means that French text is at the top in a vertical format, or to the left in a horizontal format. By comparison, at our sister museum, the Canadian War Museum, all text is presented with English first because it is located in Ottawa, Ontario—a province where the primary official language is English.

### Development Process for Bilingual Text

There is no denying that it is complicated, time-consuming, and costly to present text effectively in two languages. In our experience, there is no way of getting around this being a lengthy, multistep process that requires different types of expertise.

The steps outlined below may seem daunting; however, through much trial and error, we have found this to be an effective process. When we rush or skip steps, the text is not of equal quality in both languages, meaning that we are not providing the same level of service to all visitors. One way to expend fewer resources is to cut back the amount of text in an exhibition. We all know the disheartening statistics of how few visitors read all, or even most exhibition text. Given that editors and translators are paid by the word or by the hour, it is much more expensive to shepherd 15,000 words through the text-development process than 8,000. This is equally true of designing and printing numbers of text panels.

**Our process is as follows:**

- 1 The exhibition's creative development specialist (the team member working on the visitor experience) develops an overall text strategy in consultation with the curator and designer.** As with single-language exhibitions, this step is key to generating a clear hierarchy of text levels and an approach that will enhance the visitor experience. The text strategy is also helpful for editors and translators, who are charged with keeping all text in line with the team's intentions.
- 2 Once the strategy has been approved, the exhibition text is written.** This is a collaborative process between the curator and creative development specialist that requires a back-and-forth process of refinement. Text can be written in either English or French, depending on the first language of the curator who leads the writing process. For exhibitions with specialized vocabulary, it is useful to produce a bilingual glossary of terms at this step. Doing this systematically is much more efficient than generating the terms in an ad hoc fashion during the translation and editing process.
- 3 Text is edited in the first language.** Our editors are not in-house staff, but rather

contractors sourced from an approved list. This step involves a back-and-forth process among the editor, curator, and creative development specialist in order to sort out as many questions and clarifications as possible. Key sections of sample text are reviewed and approved by managers.

- 4 Text is translated into the second language.** Again, our translators are not in-house staff, but are drawn from an approved list.

- 5 Text is edited in the second language.** This stage is critical to ensuring that the translated text is of the same quality as the original language. Our goal is generally an adaptation of the first language—rather than a literal translation—because each language has its own distinctive structure and style. In general, we find that English can be more flexible, and better lends itself to a conversational tone; French tends to have more rigorous grammar and structure, and can seem less conversational when directly translated into English. For example, in our English-language texts, we rarely start sentences with subordinate clauses because it is too indirect an approach in an exhibition context. In French, however, subordinate clauses are considered more elegant. They are more readily accepted, as without them, text can feel brusque.

At this stage, we often consult with colleagues, asking them to read the translations in their own languages in order to confirm that texts are still on track. Most people can only assess the subtleties of text in their own first language.

- 6 The text in both languages is given a comparative reading.** This ensures that the texts match in content, style, and tone. The risk is that as each language is individually refined, meanings can stray. Our current practice is to hire an outside expert to bring fresh eyes to the

project and do a “parallel read” of the French and English texts, side by side. Or, this step can be undertaken by two bilingual editors, working together, each with strength in one language. While this adds a step, it is much easier and cheaper to change text when it is still just words on paper, rather than after it is designed, printed, and installed.

Because there are so many stages in the process, exhibition teams need to stay organized, undertaking each step systematically, while ensuring that only the most current version of the text is in use. In practice, we can usually remain on track with the bulk of the text, but there are always bits of text that are delayed, for reasons ranging from a need for further information to the addition of an artifact. The fewer of these laggards we have to deal with, the better, as their final versions can be all too easily forgotten when the final documents are sent to design.

While this process demands considerable resources of both time and money, we have consistently found that developing text in a second language actually improves the text in both languages. For example, if a sentence didn’t have much substance in the first language, it is even emptier in the second language. Or, if a translator misinterprets the meaning of a sentence, it may be a sign

that the original language would not be clear to visitors, either. These situations compel us to figure out what we are really trying to say.

Occasionally, however, the text process has helped us to significantly clarify content—thereby enhancing the exhibition itself. For our recent show on Canadian hero Terry Fox (a cancer survivor and amputee who attempted to run across the country in 1980 in order to raise money for cancer research), our translator posed a question to our curator. Had one of Terry’s iconic, fundraising T-shirts been made for him by a volunteer? Or had the volunteer enlisted someone to make it? We had skated over this distinction in the original English, because we assumed it was a detail lost to history. Fortunately, the question from the translator—*faire* versus *faire faire* (“made” versus “had made”)—led the exhibition curator to do more research. He tracked down the volunteer, collected her oral history, and obtained a related artifact from her as a donation.

Bilingual text also requires us to be thoughtful about how we convey artists’ intentions. Our standard for the titles of works of art and books is to include the creator’s title in its original language, followed by a translation in parentheses, without boldface or italics: e.g., **Bob Boyer, A Seven Arrow Storm** (Une tempête à sept flèches), 1984. This subtlety may not register for many visitors, but we feel it is important to indicate the artist’s intent by using

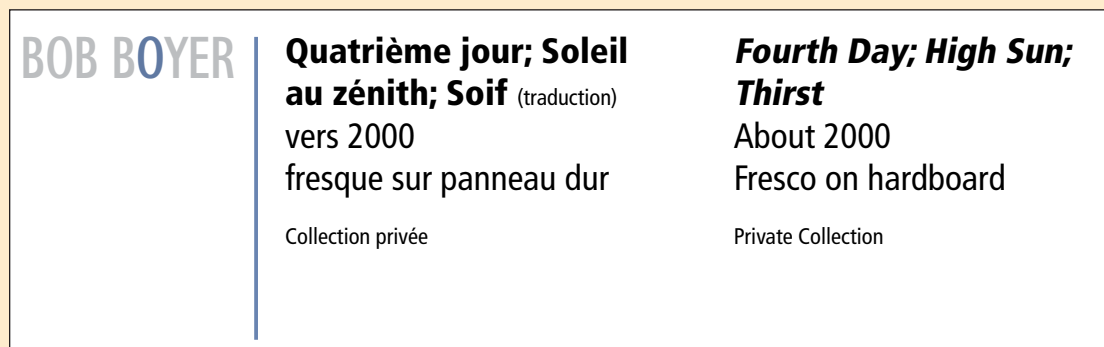


fig. 1. Artwork label from *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*. The format allows readers to easily find “their” language consistently; makes clear that the French version of the title is a translation; and depicts the artist’s name as a logo to avoid having to repeat it in two languages.

fig. 2.

Label rail from the exhibition *Snow*, showing equal presentation of both languages and a clear organization of text levels. Titles are close to the body text to signal language.

#### Se déplacer sur la neige

Dans les régions rurales, où les routes ne sont pas toujours déblayées, on fait preuve d'ingéniosité en construisant des véhicules adaptés à notre climat froid et enneigé.

La famille Regier, de Saskatchewan, construit un tel véhicule vers 1950. Elle s'en sert pour conduire les enfants à l'école et aux cours de musique, et pour aller au magasin général. L'école est à deux heures et demie de route, mais on voyage en tout confort.

#### Travelling on Snow

In rural regions, where roads were not always cleared, people showed ingenuity by building vehicles adapted to our cold and snowy climate.

The Regier family of Saskatchewan built such a vehicle around 1950. They used it to take their children to school and to music lessons, and to go to the general store. Even though the school was two and a half hours away, the family travelled in comfort.



La famille Regier devant sa voiture d'hiver, vers 1950.

Musée canadien des civilisations

The Regier family in front of its winter vehicle, around 1950.

Canadian Museum of Civilization

#### Véhicule d'hiver de la famille Regier

Vers 1950  
Ce véhicule construit entièrement à la main abritait même un petit poêle à bois pour que la famille puisse se tenir au chaud durant les longs trajets.

Musée canadien des civilisations, 701

#### The Regier family's winter vehicle

Around 1950  
Built entirely by hand, this vehicle even had a small wood-burning stove to keep the family warm on long trips.

Canadian Museum of Civilization, 701

#### Raquettes pour cheval

Vers 1950  
Ces raquettes étaient très utiles quand les chevaux devaient tirer de lourdes charges dans la neige épaisse.

Musée canadien des civilisations, A103

#### Horse snowshoes

Around 1950  
Horses wore snowshoes to help them pull heavy loads in deep snow.

Canadian Museum of Civilization, A103

his or her exact, original wording. Another approach is to translate the title and add “(translation),” which alerts visitors to the fact that we are presenting an interpretation, and also allows them to see text in their own language, all in one place (fig. 1).

### Graphic Design for Bilingual Text

Presenting text in two languages significantly increases the visual weight of exhibition text. We have thus created guidelines for the number of texts and their length. For example, our current standard for introduction text is no more than 50 words in each language. For an extended description on an artifact label, it is no more than 75 words.

One of our most significant concerns regarding good graphic design for bilingual text is ensuring that the text is visually clear and appealing, so that visitors can consistently and easily find their preferred language. Text in two languages can be presented in both vertical and horizontal formats within the same exhibition. Text in both languages must have equal visual presence, in order to make each language accessible. Generally, it is best to present both languages in one color, as it is difficult to give two colors equal visual presence. We do not use different fonts as a way to distinguish languages, as this can be busy and distracting.

Headers play an important role in bilingual text, as they signal the start of information in each language. Thematic titles should be kept close to body text, so that the text is easy for visitors to navigate (figs. 2 & 3).

We avoid placing titles too far from body text; however, if the titles are also being used as large graphic elements, we make sure to repeat them closer to the body copy, in order to cue visitors as to the language of a block of text.

Graphic design for bilingual text can also involve finding a suitable treatment for words that are the same or similar in two different languages. Sometimes it is only after the text is laid out that the potential visual confusion becomes apparent. For example, in our exhibition about Terry Fox, we had a section titled “Legacy.” The French translation is *Legs*, but that created a graphic that read “*Legs / Legacy*.” This does not cue the reader as to which language is which, and looks a bit ridiculous to anglophones. Our adjustment was to add an article to *Legs*—making it *Le Legs*—to help cue francophone visitors. In addition, some of the key words associated with Terry Fox are bilingual—“vision,” “mission,” “courage”—but others, such as “determination” and “ordeals” are not. Our designer came up with a creative solution to address these imbalances, using prominent cutout letters to unite thematic modules (fig. 4 & intro images).

### Bilingual Text Is Valuable

Bilingual exhibition text provides rich opportunities for cross-cultural discussion and understanding. At CHM, for borrowed international exhibitions, we sometimes face the challenge of adapting text from European French or English to Canadian French and English. It is no easy task—as the differences in vocabulary and style

fig. 3.

This label rail from *Terry Fox: Running to the Heart of Canada* shows a clear hierarchy of text levels and a clear separation between the two languages.



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fig. 4.

Multiple levels of text in the Terry Fox exhibition. Since "Mission" (seen here in large blue letters) has the same meaning in both French and English, it is not repeated.

[T]here is nothing better than overhearing a visitor chuckle at a play on words that works perfectly in his or her language, or seeing a student suddenly “get” a concept, simply because someone, somewhere along the way—writer, curator, creative specialist, editor, translator, interpreter, designer—took the time to get it right.

range from the most obvious to the most subtle—but the process of adaptation encourages our project teams to reflect on the similarities and differences that divide and unite us through language. Adapting international exhibitions and translating our own exhibitions often gets us talking about our own cultural understanding of phrases, names, and topics in Canadian French and English—sometimes more context is needed in one language than another. Language is such a strong expression of culture that our conversations often go beyond vocabulary and grammar to our fundamental ways of seeing the world.

It can be challenging to provide concise, effective, informative, and visually appealing text in one language, let alone two. And the route from gleam in a museum’s eye to finished text on exhibition walls rarely runs smoothly. In the end, however, there is nothing better than overhearing a visitor chuckle at a play on words that works perfectly in his or her language, or seeing a student

suddenly “get” a concept, simply because someone, somewhere along the way—writer, curator, creative specialist, editor, translator, interpreter, designer—took the time to get it right.

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