

## Literature in Translation: Why is it so Difficult to Enter the Anglo-American Market?

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**Theme:** This ARI explores issues relating to literature in translation and the prospects for literature written in Spanish to enter the American market.

**Summary:** Though international publishing is one of the largest and most profitable cultural industries, literary fiction and poetry in translation from languages other than English often cannot exist without subsidies in what has become a globalised, highly competitive and commercial environment. This ARI briefly outlines the public sector initiatives that exist in Europe to promote the translation and publication of literature and what other barriers exist against translated fiction, especially in the UK. It then comments on the example of Spanish publishing in the US, the new trend whereby US publishers bring out titles in English and Spanish simultaneously, instead of importing the Spanish titles from a Spanish publishing house, thus making a link with e-book technology and online publishing. In a future e-publishing industry, local publishing houses could also offer the books in different languages online, without the need to sell the e-rights to foreign publishing houses.

### Analysis:

#### *Literature in Translation and Initiatives to Promote it*

The publishing sector is a highly commercial one, but 'literature' is also an art form; literature can provide readers with a unique insight into the past and present of a culture, as well as aiding the recognition of common concerns and a shared heritage, and in this way promote intercultural understanding.

Literary fiction and poetry in translation often cannot exist without subsidies in what has become a highly competitive, commercial global environment. This applies especially to the translation of literatures written in languages other than those that are widely spoken, outside the Anglo-American mainstream.

The UK and the US are the most interesting and most difficult markets into which to get translated, commanding as they do the lingua franca of the contemporary world. An estimated 300-500 million people across the world speak English as their first language and an estimated 1 billion as a second language. One recent estimate is that 1.9 billion

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people, nearly a third of the world's population, have a basic proficiency in English. Therefore, translation into English is important as a gateway to translation into other languages, as many editors from all over the world are then be able to read the book in English and decide whether to translate it into their own languages.

Each year, 11,500 fiction books are published in the UK. The statistics from the Publishers' Association do not, however, include data on books in translation. The only data available are figures for 2004 which indicate that approximately 1.8% of the fiction published in the UK had been translated. Compared to other European countries –12.4% in Germany, 24% in Spain and 15% in France–, the figure for the UK looks very low.

Even if at least 60% of translations in any country come from English, the fact that the remaining 40% are translated from other languages implies a much healthier, larger and diverse origin than the 1.8% of total translations into English (source: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels / Ministry of Culture Spain / French Institute London, Alexandra Buchler Report – Making Literature Travel).

English language readers grow up reading nothing but English-language publications; readers in the rest of the world have always grown up reading translations.

In the US the situation is similar: the 23 April 2006 edition of the *New York Times*, in an article by Dinitia Smith on *PEN World Voices: The New York Festival of International Literature*, revealed an unsurprising but nonetheless distressing fact: 'Andrew Grabois, the senior director of the R.R. Bowker company, which keeps track of publishing industry figures, said this week that of the 185,000 books printed in English in the United States in 2004, only 874 were adult literature in translation'.

Translation constitutes an added cost in the process of publishing a book. Most European countries operate programmes that promote their national literature abroad and encourage its translation, as well as supporting their own publishers in bringing international literature to local readers. The grant-giving organisations outlined below aim to help promote a country's own literature abroad, increasing the international knowledge of that country's culture. These grants also have an economic purpose in fostering trade and helping the country's home book industry.

The Spanish Ministry of Culture provides aid for publishers to finance the cost of translation of literary or scientific works by Spanish authors originally written and published in any of Spain's official languages. The beneficiaries are Spanish or foreign publishers. In France, a programme was launched in 1993 by the Literature Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that gives direct funding to publishers to assist with promotional or translation costs via the Bureau du Livre (part of the French Embassy) in London. It can complement translation subsidies given by the Centre National du Livre. The Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature exists to promote interest in Dutch-language literature abroad; and the list goes on... The beneficiaries of these grants are foreign publishers: some countries subsidise up to 70% of the translation costs.

As English is the most difficult language into which to get translated and published, there are many initiatives from other European countries that are tailor-made for UK publishers and literary agents, regularly informing them of new books and reviews published in those countries. Among the journals and special magazines aimed at UK publishers to keep

them informed is *New Books in German* (published since 1996), a twice-yearly journal aimed chiefly at busy British and American editors who would like to publish more translations but who appreciate independent help in finding the right titles from among the thousands published each year in German.

Another initiative is *French Book News*, an electronic newsletter sent to publishers, libraries and others, with news about books published in France and information about grants, etc. The newsletter is published by the Cultural Service of the French Embassy under the direction of the Cultural Counsellor.

The on-line promotional magazine *New Spanish Books* (Spanish Trade Mission – ICEX, operated by the Economic and Commercial Office department at the Embassy in the UK) was created following the German model in 2006. The number of translations in the UK of books in Spanish (from Spain or Latin America) has increased, according to the Director of *New Spanish Books*, by 50%, from 63 in 2004 to 93 in 2007; of these, 26 are ‘classics’ and 67 ‘contemporary works’.

The EU encourages cultural cooperation among its member states and candidate countries by providing partial financial support for projects. EU spending on culture has traditionally been considered unacceptably low by cultural operators around Europe. Funding for projects in the area of books and reading, and especially support for the publishing of translations, is also considered low, both in real terms and as a proportion of the overall expenditure of the programme.

The changes which have influenced international publishing in the past decade – globalisation and the centralisation of bookselling to name just two – have had a profound impact on the publishing of literature in translation. The ethos has changed at the very core of the publishing business and one simple rule seems to apply across the board: every single title has to make a profit. In a market the size of the UK or US, this means selling at least 20,000 copies, while most foreign titles, unless they are by established names, are published with a print run of approximately 2,000.

The cost of translation is often cited as a factor inhibiting the publication of greater print runs. It cannot be denied that translated work does incur higher costs than work originally written in English but these costs have to be considered alongside the fact that translated books are often published on relatively low advances. There is also a large infrastructure of grants available, as outlined above, to offset the original investments.

The other argument frequently voiced against publishing translations relates to the cultural insularity or ‘little England-ism’ of the reading public and publishers. The reasons for this could be historical, as this attitude is influenced by the dominance of English as a world language over the last century. Linked to this is the fact that language teaching in the UK is often considered poor, leading to less study of works by foreign authors and less intellectual curiosity about other cultures.

#### *The Bilingual Publishing Trend in the US*

Spanish is the second most commonly used language in the US after English. According to the 2006 American Community Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau, Spanish is the primary language spoken at home by over 34 million people aged five or older. The US is home to more than 40 million Hispanics, making it the world’s fifth-largest Spanish-speaking community after Mexico, Colombia, Spain and Argentina.

A little over a decade ago, Spanish-language books occupied the smallest slice of shelf space at bookstores around the country. But the 2000 census and its revelations about the fast-growing Hispanic population sparked renewed interest among US publishing houses in meeting the reading wishes of Spanish speakers. Then came Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which not only shot up the international charts but quickly became one of the best-selling translations into Spanish of all time. While successful Spanish-language titles in the US typically sell between 15,000 and 20,000 copies, more than 300,000 copies of *El Código Da Vinci* were scooped off bookstore shelves across the land, ushering in what some described as a new era for Spanish-language books in America.

Now publishers are starting to time the release of English and Spanish versions so they coincide. Best-selling translations have helped the book market overall by alerting readers to the broadening selection of Spanish titles available at their local bookstores.

That was when several major US publishers began establishing divisions to cultivate new Hispanic talent and focus on the sale of both Spanish-language books and English books geared for the Hispanic market. About that time, large chain booksellers began hiring Spanish book-buyers to study market demographics and expand their *Libros en Español* sections. Publishers from Spain were for many years the only players serving the Hispanic market. But now they are competing with US houses for new authors and translation rights.

#### *The Technological Revolution in the Publishing Sector*

As technology advances –and the 'eReader' and the 'Kindle' are on the market since last year– the publishing industry will change dramatically. The elements needed are: a device that makes reading pleasurable; content at the right price; a great selection of content; and e-books that are easy to use.

On the face of it, an e-book is an attractive proposition, not least because it can offer features difficult or impossible to find in a printed book, such as hyperlinks, multimedia content, cut and paste, high degrees of interactivity and updated content. It can be downloaded and read instantly, and publishers do not have to transport huge volumes of books around the country and store them in warehouses.

E-book sales statistics for April 2008 have been released by the Association of American Publishers (AAP), which collects them, as does the International Digital Publishers Forum ([www.idpf.org](http://www.idpf.org)). Trade e-book sales totalled US\$3,400,000 in April 2008, a 19.9% increase over April 2007.

Paper remains the best medium for text reading, and until recently it has been hard to offer similar clarity on a screen. But the development of e-ink technology, which uses millions of black and white microcapsules on a screen, from the E-ink Corporation, has dramatically improved text on a screen. Sony's Reader uses e-ink and the company says its battery will last for up to 7,500 page turns.

So who is using e-books at this moment? Leaving aside database-type products and technical manuals, the answer is: a wide range of readers. 'All major publishers have e-books, and that includes front catalogue as well as back catalogue. Around 60 to 70% of the *New York Times* bestseller list is available in e-book form', says Nick Bogaty, executive director of the International Digital Publishers Forum (IDPF).

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Will literature in translation benefit from the technological revolution? Literature in translation works well from English into other languages (but not so well the other way round) and between minority languages.

If e-books become available for sale on publishers' websites, they could be directly published in several languages, especially in English, without the need to sell the rights to foreign or UK/US publishing houses. This applies at least to the e-rights; the printed rights could be sold as before, to foreign publishing houses.

Just as American publishers have become aware of an audience that reads in Spanish, and created strategies to publish bestsellers simultaneously in English and Spanish, acquiring those rights instead of importing them from Spain, I believe the technological revolution in the publishing industry could follow the same example. A Spanish publishing house could publish an e-book in the industry's major languages and sell it directly from its website or specially-devised portal to the whole world without the need to sell the translation rights to other publishers in different countries.

This would enormously increase the potential for books written in minority languages to be made available to all.

**Conclusion:** France, Spain and Germany far outstrip the UK in terms of providing international literary exchange, cooperation and translation.

I have tried to outline the main reasons why the amount of literature in translation is so low in the UK: historical and cultural reasons; Britain's deep-seated cultural parochialism; and the power of the English language, as the major language in the global context, which is also partly reflected in conglomerations of publishers and booksellers.

I have outlined European governments' existing initiatives to improve the situation, eg, subsidies from other countries, information bulletins and literary prizes. But why are publishers operating in the UK market still reluctant? Perhaps it is not a cost issue at all: the money seems to be there.

If it is not the cost issue as such that prevents literature in translation being widely accepted in Britain, perhaps the reason is cultural.

One of the main reasons why the EU aims to foster the process of cultural exchange and the promotion of European literature in other languages is as a reaction to the growing influence of Americanisation. On the one hand the promotion of literature in translation is designed to foster the idea that we share common human values; on the other hand, it is intended to draw attention to and preserve the illusion of regional identities and distinctions. One of the reasons why Britain is relatively indifferent to the idea of acknowledging cultural difference –as reflected in foreign literature– may be that it does not interpret globalisation as a threat. The long-standing British indifference to foreign languages as American English asserted itself as the language of international commerce, has transformed itself into the 'worship' of multi-culturalism. It could be that 'multi-culturalism' provides the illusion of 'otherness' –one argument could be 'who needs to read the English translation from a Spanish or Italian novel when you can read Salman Rushdie or Zadie Smith writing in the original?'–.

British cultural insularity may well be eroded as younger generations become increasingly exposed to European culture through education –including foreign literature in the school curriculum– and through exchanges and travelling. The EU’s cultural agenda is likely to involve raising the profile of translators, with grants and awards encouraging quality and increased activity. Even with all these developments, literature in translation will still have a long and bumpy road towards achieving significant acceptance in the UK.

As books become cheaper to produce and to distribute, with technological advances (and although the need for physical distribution will still remain in many cases), the e-book and e-reader open up the possibility of on-line publishing, whereby literature in translation might not need foreign partners but can instead be sold directly by the publishing house to readers globally –regulations permitting–.

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