

# FINLAND'S LITERARY TRANSLATORS ASK FAIR COMPENSATION

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**I**n Finland people still make a living as professional literary translators. Well – sort of. More or less. A 2008 CEATL (Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires) survey, available at [www.ceatl.eu/docs/surveyuk.pdf](http://www.ceatl.eu/docs/surveyuk.pdf), charts the bleak situation of literary translators in Europe.

The following editorial by Finnish translator Tarja Roinila appeared on the Finnish literary criticism website *Kiiltomato.net* in March this year (<http://www.kiiltomato.net/?cat=editorial>). Since then, the community of Finnish literary translators has banded together in a dramatic publicity campaign to raise public awareness of their situation: Kaijamari Sivill, current president of the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL), and translator Tarja Roinila appeared together with a publisher's representative on a cultural program of the national radio; Heikki Karjalainen, chair of the SKTL's literary division, was interviewed on another major radio program; Sivill and a representative from a different publishing house were interviewed on a popular television talk show. Newspapers continue to carry the story. The public has responded sympathetically to the translators' dilemma, and publishers, too, express concern.

The major Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* ran a summary in English.

This is just the latest instance of coordinated activism among Finnish translators. Their prolonged efforts have led to official recognition of literary translation as art: read "Capturing an Elusive Truth" in the March 2009 *ATA Chronicle* about Kersti Juva's appointment as Artist Professor. In a separate initiative, in November and December 2008, Finnish translators campaigned against proposed personnel cuts at the national Research Institute for the Languages of Finland and succeeded in having the cuts tabled for further consideration. (See the next *ATA Nordic Division* newsletter/blog for the full story.) Both SKTL President Kaijamari Sivill and Artist Professor Kersti Juva will be at the ATA conference in NY, and Juva will also attend this year's ALTA Conference.

# A PROFESSION, NOT A HOBBY

BY TARJA ROINILA  
TRANS. JILL TIMBERS

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ON THE FINNISH LITERARY CRITICISM WEBSITE KIILTOMATO  
([HTTP://WWW.KIILTOMATO.NET/?CAT=EDITORIAL&ID=179](http://www.kiiltomato.net/?cat=editorial&id=179)).

It will soon be twenty years since I had my first literary translation published. It was the fulfillment of a longtime wish. To make the dream come true, a publishing house had to take an interest in this newcomer and her book proposal, and I myself had to do thorough groundwork and persistent knocking on doors.

In addition, I had to be ready to work virtually for free. I accepted the situation because I had no choice. Fortunately, I knew how to bake bread, and I could print for free at the university. I figured the making a living part would work itself out later. The most important thing was to get a start in the profession.



*Tarja Roinila translates literature from Spanish, French and German into Finnish. Among her recent books is a prize-winning anthology of Spanish poetry which she edited and translated together with Jukka Koskelainen.*

I am among the fortunate ones who have had the opportunity to translate challenging literary texts into Finnish: poetry, philosophy, modern prose classics. I have gotten my proposals approved within the publishing houses, work has been plentiful and I have received grants in support of difficult projects. I enjoy the work, work in which both craftsmanship and critical reading skills develop constantly, work for which I must continually study new subjects and each time devise different translation strategies.

I am proud of my profession. The quality of literary translations in Finland is impressively high. Translators have a model work ethic. The

amount of expertise and specialist knowledge amassed within the translator community is astonishing, as you notice best when you send a problem or question to the communal e-mail list.

I've had it good.

I recently bumped into a colleague my age who told me she had started selling cosmetics. Although she has plenty of interesting translation work and she has also received grants, she cannot afford to be a full-time translator. The math just doesn't work, even though the work week is often seven days and there are virtually no vacations, rarely even a two-day breather between two books.

Shortly after this conversation I heard about another colleague who has begun horticulture studies. About a third, who is considering nursing. She enjoys translation, but the conditions are harsh, and exhaustion, ever-present.

My colleagues' decisions caused me to look afresh at my own "good fortune." I have taken it as more or less a given that this is a low-paying field (coincidentally, dominated by women). Nonetheless, I work for businesses that sell a product – the translated book – which would not exist without my contribution.

And so, I could have had things better. Fair compensation might have been paid for my work. I might have gotten away on vacation occasionally. It might even have been that translation fees were reflected in pension accrual. My increasing experience and professional development might have shown even somewhat in my income level.

### **Monthly income under 1000 euros**

I calculate that my last novel translation left me with less than 1000 euros in hand per month, without even taking into consideration the two weeks of groundwork I did at my own risk to initiate the translation: reading, preparing and then writing the proposal. In the business world one would say I served as the publisher's "consultant" – does the term conjure visions of a handsome invoice?

Translations and their degrees of difficulty vary, of course, but it is my experience that it is hard to reach gross monthly earnings of 1000 euros with a 40 hour work week. I hear similar numbers from colleagues. That gross income does appear to be quite routine for experienced professionals translating the most difficult texts.

Many speak of monthly incomes averaging 700 - 900 euros. If you combine that with an annual grant (about 1300 euros a month), which only a few translators receive each year, a translator, with luck, could achieve a gross income of 2000 euros a month. From the gross income, not only taxes but also a mandatory 20.8% self-employment pension contribution are deducted.

The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters has calculated the relationship between monthly earnings and number of pages translated into Finnish. At the *highest market prices* currently paid for literary prose (approximately 14 euros for 1000 keystrokes) a translator can attain a taxable monthly income of 1300 euros by translating about 1000 pages a year. (This figure takes into account the statutory pension contribution and some business deductions.)

A thousand pages is a lot, particularly if the text is artistically ambitious and its translation pace therefore slow.

At a quick estimate, compensation needs to be doubled or even tripled if it is even remotely to correspond to the professional skills required by the job.

### **Financial situation critical**

CEATL, the European Council of Associations of Literary Translators, recently conducted a survey of literary translators' compensation in a number of European countries. Finland placed near the bottom of the comparison. In Finland, literary translators earn 44% of the average wages of workers in the manufacturing and services sector, whose pay averages 2730 euros. Only Italy had a lower figure.

The CEATL report states that "in Greece, Germany, Finland, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, the material situation of translators is critical and professional literary translators are virtually on the bread line."

Finland's situation is particularly alarming for two reasons. First, the percentage of literature published in translation is greatest in Finland of all the countries mentioned above, at 66 percent. (The corresponding figure for Germany is 22%.) Second, Denmark and Finland are the only countries in the "critical" group in which literary translation is the full-time primary occupation for at least half of the literary translators. The future of the whole profession is thus at stake.

Finnish translators deserve better. The majority depend on the income from this work for their livelihood, and many of those who do other work in order to keep their heads above

water would prefer to concentrate on literary translation. Professional literary translators are not a marginal group. Two thirds of our literature is translated into Finnish from other languages.

Nor is it all the same who translates these books. If experienced literary translators burn out and more and more of them decide to throw in the towel, the quality of translations will suffer. This is a matter of the survival of literary translation as a true profession. "What does it say about the quality of literary exchange between our societies if literary translators are forced to dash off their work just to be able to earn a basic living?" asks CEATL.

The fact that in the past decade translators' real income has remained constant or even dropped does not help the situation. According to a report by the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, translation compensation rose 15% and the cost of living, 18% between 1997 and 2007. This figure includes all types of literature, fiction and nonfiction. Compensation for literary prose rose 21% during the same period, but even that is just half what the general income level index rose.

### **The pay level has no objective basis**

The harsh facts compel me to look at my professional work environment with new eyes. The high quality of Finnish translations and the dedication of Finnish literary translators to their work seem downright amazing.

Unless they do it for "the love of art." That diabolical phrase may explain quite a lot. Perhaps it reveals a way of thinking that lurks behind these problems, a way of thinking that

afflicts not just the field of translation but the whole cultural arena. As a literary translator I should be satisfied with little, because I enjoy my work so much.

The linkage between a calling and gainful employment can be wearisome. It is tedious to explain to the other party in fee negotiations that I actually try to support myself with this work – as if the other party did not know that. An unspoken current running through these discussions is a concept or at the very least an established practice that insults my professionalism – the idea that I do not deserve to be paid reasonable compensation, in contrast to an industrial designer or an architect, for instance, who are also key figures in the process of artistic production and who work for businesses. This is a structural problem for which there is no single scapegoat. For that very reason it requires us all to rethink the issues.

Our literary language was created through translation into Finnish. The profession's roots stretch back to the late 1800s. The body of professionals is nevertheless young, for professional literary translators emerged only in the 1970s when we were allowed entry to the world of grants and subsidies. In an amazingly short time, the profession of literary translators has achieved widespread esteem, which can be seen not only in media recognition but also in surveys of what Finns value.

Measured by the other gauge dominant in our economic system, however, we are the dregs of society. Money is at once both a symbolic and the most tangible measure of esteem, although it remains a delicate subject to discuss in the

cultural realm. We aren't really doing this for the money, are we?

Habits of thought and established practice are deeply entrenched. For this reason it is important to remind people that there is no rational, objective basis for the reigning level of compensation. There are only so-called economic realities on whose account discussions of value are assiduously dodged. There are only pragmatic reasons, one of which is that we have no real power in negotiations -- bluntly put, no way to exert pressure. In terms of the basic functioning of society, we are not key players; but in terms of the foundation of culture, we are indeed.

Sustainable conditions for the practice of the literary translation profession in Finland must be achieved. This work is not finished. To accomplish it we need the efforts of not only the literary translators but also the publishers, and, most of all, we need frank discussion between the translators and the publishers. It would be nice to be able in good conscience to recommend this fine profession to the linguistically talented literature lovers of the next generation who dream of it.