



Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires  
European Council of Literary Translators' Associations

## LITERARY TRANSLATION AND LITERARY TRANSLATORS

Literary translation is clearly of paramount importance for the European project. The intense exchanges that have been going on for centuries are the glue that binds together this cultural entity called 'Europe'. Written texts play a crucial role in these exchanges, because, as the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan points out, it is in their literature (in the broad sense of 'written tradition') that living cultures store their capital: in order to understand another culture, you have to read its books. Literary translation is therefore a fundamental requisite for key European concepts such as 'cultural diversity' and 'intercultural dialogue'. In the words of Umberto Eco: 'The language of Europe is translation.'

Current EU policy gives serious consideration to literary translation, but not to literary translators. Each year, EU grants of some €2 million are awarded to concrete translation projects. This funding goes to the publishers, not to the creators. In an ideal market system, in which commissioned work was remunerated according to the artists' level of education, the quality of their work and the amount of time invested, this kind of economic subsidy for publishers would of course be profitable to the whole sector, translators included.

But the fact is, the market model does not work. Literary translators have a particularly weak market position, if any at all. This is due mainly to the invisibility which is almost inherent in the act of translation: in a translated work, it is hard to identify the translator's personal artistic contribution, and, as long as the public remains unaware of that contribution, translators have no symbolic capital with which to enter the market as 'cultural entrepreneurs'. This problem is aggravated by the age-old tradition of literary translation as a hobby for cultured people with time on their hands: there is no quality control, and remuneration was never a major consideration until quite recently (1970s), when the booming book market created a

need for *professional* literary translators. And so, although under the terms of copyright law translators are considered as creators of original works of literature and, as such, enjoy the same status as authors, in the everyday practice of publishing they are still regarded as more or less interchangeable. Translators are important transmitters of culture, but the nature of their work means that the market treats them as mere drudges; they are the last item in the budget.

This is confirmed by CEATL's recent survey of literary translators' working conditions in 23 European countries: in 20 out of these 23 countries, literary translators' average purchasing power is less than 60% of the per capita purchasing power standard (PPS), and in 14 countries it is not even 50% of PPS. The difference between the income of translators and that of other artists is that literary translators normally work on commission: they are paid to do a job, but their fee does not even come close to that of a plumber or a carpenter. In some countries a royalty system exists in addition to the basic fees, but percentages are so low that earnings from royalties are generally negligible.

The impact of poor working conditions and remuneration on translation quality is of course huge. Literary translators have to work under enormous pressure of time in order to make a living. Not surprisingly, CEATL's survey shows that translators' average annual output is much higher in countries where the fees are lower and where there is no system of grants to literary translators; in the country with the highest grant budget, The Netherlands, translators' average annual output is the lowest of all European countries. Something is definitely rotten in the state of Literary Translation, but the European Commission does not really seem to be aware of the problem. Indeed, the 'fixed rates' for translation grants to publishers, recently established by the EACEA (Executive Agency for Culture, Education and Audiovisual), show a complete ignorance of the situation on the ground.

If Europe wants to promote the concepts of cultural diversity and cultural exchange as the core of European citizenship, measures need to be put in place to guarantee the quality of this exchange. Literary translation is not just any art form, it is the art form that embodies and facilitates European cultural unity: it is our cultural infrastructure. Therefore, literature should not be forced to compete with other

cultural projects in a non-sectoral Culture Programme, as is the case in the current Culture 2007-2013 programme, but should have its own earmarked budget, as it did in the Ariane programme and under Culture 2000-2006. Policy should be focused on raising the visibility of literary translators, strengthening their social and economic position, stimulating their mobility (which is essential to their work), and enabling them to improve their skills, increase their knowledge and stay in touch with the living culture of which they are the ambassadors.

Special attention should be paid to the translation centre system, which is a relatively low-cost but highly effective way of achieving some of the above goals. Many European countries now have one or two such centres, a number of which are grouped in the RECIT network. During their stay, translators can work on their translations (sometimes in consultation with 'their' authors), do research in libraries, exchange knowledge and experience with colleagues from other countries, and immerse themselves in the language and culture from which they translate. Between 2000 and 2006, the RECIT-affiliated translation centres applied annually to the European Commission for one-year grants, which they were almost always awarded (from the earmarked literature budget, representing 9% of the total European culture budget). Ironically, in spite of the Commission's increased awareness of matters concerning cultural diversity and intercultural exchange, the translators' centres have much more difficulty obtaining funds under the current Culture Programme, where they have to compete for subsidies with other art forms – which is a problem because the centres are not projects, and thus are not fashionable or 'sexy': they need structural funding to be able to continue their work on a regular basis.

In short, a European Union in which translation plays such a fundamental role, both culturally and financially, should be more willing and better placed than any other institution to provide ongoing support for literary translation. CEATL, as the main interlocutor in the field, is prepared to work with the European authorities to achieve this.

CEATL, December 2008

[info@ceatl.eu](mailto:info@ceatl.eu) / [www.ceatl.eu](http://www.ceatl.eu)