

Human rights for translators?

Morten Visby

As President of CEATL, I appreciate this opportunity to say a few words about something that is ongoing in the board, and something I feel is quite crucial to what CEATL is all about. In the everyday business of the board we deal with a number of mundane and sometimes important issues: Should we endorse this or that campaign for respect of copyright in library politics, should we be critical of the current Creative Europe programme, and how should we deal with latest absurdities of *Moniteur Belge*?

Addressing the specifics

However, following our latest Annual General Meeting in Copenhagen, the present CEATL delegates, representing 29 countries in Europe, mandated the board to draft a declaration on the human rights of literary translators. I suppose in a sense that could be a relatively easy task, since there are plenty of other civic organizations with a similar focus on art, language and literature who have issued declarations on freedom of speech and human rights for authors and artists. Declarations that CEATL could surely lean on in this respect.

However, in our initial discussions in the board following the mandate from the AGM, it became clear to us that we wanted to draft a declaration that addresses the specific situation of literary translators, not just authors in general, in terms of human rights and freedom of speech. And this is where things start to get a little complicated.

Because although literary translators certainly share the general concerns of other authors' and artists' organizations when it comes to freedom of speech, for example, we must also acknowledge that translation raises slightly different questions. Which kind of freedom is at stake when it comes to freedom of speech for literary translators? And whose speech are we talking about? Do we as translators derive our freedom of speech from the original author? Or do we have a particular speech of our own that must be protected from oppression and coercion in a cultural and political context? And what happens if we model our own freedom of speech on that of the author? While literary translators do have an authorial command of their own writing, they are



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also of course subject to an editing and publication process that few translators would claim or even wish to control autonomously. Is that censorship? Indeed, the whole business of translation involves massive alterations of the original work influenced by cultural contexts and, sometimes, tailored to a specific audience. And of course, translators work on assignment, expressing ideas and opinions that they do not necessarily share.

Violation of expression

How can we pinpoint, in all this, where the translator's own right to undiluted articulation, free of censorship and fear, becomes distinct? And seeing that book market dynamics and cultural policies often have limiting consequences on the actual possibility of translating the literary voices you want to make heard, we could also ask ourselves whether this constitutes a violation of our right to express ourselves as literary translators. This last question may be a bit over the top, but it does help point out, I hope, that there is no clear-cut definition of the scope of human rights for translators.

These are some of the questions that have made it difficult for the board to work with this mandate. But it has been an interesting process, and we do hope to be able to have a draft ready for the next AGM in Norwich. I should of course point out that none of the above 'complications' should be taken in any way to imply that CEATL is not fully committed to the human rights of translators. I am not saying that there is no need to defend our rights. There most certainly is. And around the world and in Europe there are fellow translators being persecuted for their literary activities, just as there are a number of developments that can potentially limit the cultural diversity of world literature. This is something that CEATL will always care about. But in drafting a declaration on human rights and freedom of speech we must make sure that it truly addresses our concerns and our realities as translators. If CEATL does not address these things, no one else will. We will talk more about this during CEATL's upcoming AGM in Norwich.