

TRANSLATING BETWEEN SMALL LANGUAGES

A celebration of otherness

Translations into and out of Basque

Garazi Ugalde Pikabea

In the first issue of [Counterpoint](#), Máire Nic Mhaoláin spoke to us about Celtic languages and her experiences as a translator between Welsh and Irish. She summed up by saying that literary translations in that language combination are still rare. Literary translation between two minority languages is not a common phenomenon, as these languages tend to gravitate towards bigger or more dominant languages in search of prestige and visibility, in an effort to make a place for themselves in the world of letters. However, literary translation between minority languages does exist and can be very diverse as regards both its motivation and its form.

In Basque literature, translations into and out of bigger or geographically close languages such as Spanish, English, French, Catalan or Galician prevail. There are far more translations into Basque than out of it, although a lot of work has gone into translating and promoting Basque literature abroad in recent years. For example, [The Etxepare Basque Institute](#), whose task is to promote and spread Basque language and culture at

an international level, provides grants for the translation of works originally written and published in Basque, as well as a prize for literary translation. There are many translations between Basque, Galician and Catalan, all languages which share the same hegemonic language and have co-official status in their respective regional autonomies. Let's remember that since 1979 Basque enjoys official status together with Spanish in the Basque Autonomous Region and in one area in Navarra, whilst it has no official recognition in the French territories (a legal situation it shares with Catalan).

Collaboration with publishers

There has been considerable exchange of literary translations between these three languages since the 1980s and this has been centred around children and young adult literature in particular, followed by poetry and other genres. There are publishing houses that collaborate closely with each other in publishing translations or other publishers like Kalandraka, who have published in the four principal languages of Spain works written originally in one of the co-official languages of the Spanish

“Spanish acts as a bridge language”

state. However, everything points to the centre still being of importance in the relationships between the peripheral languages: Spanish acts as the bridge language between the smaller literatures, either through indirect translation through Spanish or because the translations are a response to the state’s concept of the market. But that very relationship of going through the centre could contribute to the development of peripheral literary systems and a more egalitarian and autonomous relationship between them.

Literary translations between Basque and other minority, geographically close languages like, Asturian, Aragonese or Aranese – minority languages which don’t enjoy the same sociolinguistic status as those previously mentioned – aren’t so systematic and are very few in number. Nor can we talk about a systematic relationship with minority languages in France, although there has been a particular exchange of translations with Occitan and Breton.

Outside of market considerations, we can find sporadic Basque translations from Occitan, Scots Gaelic, Irish, Kyrghiz or Quechua, whilst literary works written originally in Basque have been translated on occasion into Breton, Welsh, Frisian and Quechua. In spite of being isolated and marginal translations (some were published in reviews) they are very

interesting from the sociolinguistic and symbolic point of view.

Inspiration from neighbouring countries

Among the translations from Occitan, the epic poem *Mireio* (1859) by Federic Mistral, a symbol of the renaissance in Occitan literature, stands out. The translation into Basque was published in 1930, at a time when the Basque people were inspired by Provence, waiting for a Basque Mistral who would save the language of their forebears. Decades later, the poem *Lo Dider de Guernica* by the well-known Occitan writer Bernat Manciet, would be published in Basque. The poem denounced the massacre of Gernika and its translation led to a multi-lingual re-edition on the 75th anniversary of the bombing.

In 1991, we had a collection of texts in Quechua entitled *Pongoq mosqoynin*, which included a song, various poems and a short story to which the title owes its name: *The dream of Pongo*, an indigenous story which the Peruvian writer, José María Arguedas heard from the mouth of a farmer from Cuzco. The Basque edition is a bilingual book in Quechua and Basque, apparently translated from another Quechua- Spanish bilingual edition published in Cuba. Furthermore, as of 2013, we have been able to read the Quechua translation of the first book published in Basque: *Linguae vasconum primitiae* by Bernart Etxepare (1545). This work of great symbolic value for the Basque language – previously available in Spanish, English, French, German and Italian – was translated simultaneously into Arabic, Romanian, Chinese, Quechua, Galician and Catalan



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Photo: Private Archive

for Basque Language International Day, thanks to an agreement between the Basque Parliament and the Academy of the Basque Language. Clearly, these are specific, isolated translations, but their very existence is interesting because it hints at a will to move closer to other minority literatures and a need for exchange between languages of a similar status.

“Translation can have a double effect on minority languages”

In short, translation can have a double effect on minority languages: on the one hand it can be an indicator of dependency if it revolves around a dominant language or literature; conversely, it can give rise to a constructive and strengthening process which can have a bearing on

the autonomy of the minority language, and can contribute to building bridges between peripheral literatures. As Michal Cronin, author, translator and Director of the Trinity Centre for Literary and Cultural Translation, Dublin, has said, in an article in the journal **The Translator** translation between minority languages can be a celebration of otherness and can bring us to look for references and establish more egalitarian relationships for those languages: “Difference does not have to result in the pathology of closure. A celebration of difference can lead to an embrace of other differences, the universalism lying not in the eradication of the other but in sharing a common condition of being a minor other.”

Translated from the Spanish original by Anne Larchet