



# Counterpoint

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Translators' E-zine

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# From the editors

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To say that things have changed since the previous publication of our e-zine in December 2019 would be a serious understatement of the seismic shifts which have taken place in all our lives, the world over.

Readers may know that one of the myriad of consequences of this surreal pandemic is that CEATL's physical AGM, due to be held in Brussels in May, has been cancelled. This is a source of much disappointment for all of us delegates, as this annual physical gathering allows us to connect with our colleagues, get up-to-date information on happenings throughout our member country associations and make plans for the future, a word which nowadays conjures up much uncertainty.

We hope that *Counterpoint* can at least continue CEATL's task of informing both our own members and the wider literary translation world about news and views and bring some small solace to you all.

This issue continues with our regular features, *Out And About*, this time

from the Balkans, with an exchange between Albania and Bulgaria, and *Notes From Around Europe*, also from the Balkans where one of CEATL's most recent members, UKPS from Serbia, recount their battle for protecting translators' rights.

A look at our inner workings comes from CEATL's Training and Education Working Group, bringing us up to date on their work over recent years. We are very appreciative of our colleagues' contribution to *Counterpoint* and hope their labours will bear some fruit.

In a new regular feature, *Me And My Dictionary*, Tuncay Birkan enlightens readers as to the political intricacies of translation into Turkish.

We wish to especially express our solidarity with our Italian and Spanish colleagues who have suffered so much in the last number of months. CEATL delegate Eva Valvo has written a very poignant piece about the harsh realities of life as a translator in Italy during the last number of weeks and months.

The realities, and the hardships, of working as a freelance translator are very apparent in an interview with Valeria Pulignano about her research into the precariousness of our profession. The initial findings show that CEATL's constant fight for decent working conditions is certainly much needed and even more so in recent times with the ever-changing labour market.

The fascinating love story of mestizo cultures, written and oral languages and translators in the middle of it all feature large in Malika Embarek Lopez's piece.

As translators, we are very aware of the wealth of words and expressions to describe hopeful outcomes in our different languages and cultures. For this occasion, and to conclude on a vaguely positive note, it is worth relaying the words of Julian of Norwich, who lived through and survived the Black Death as well a number of wars in the 14th century and then spent much her life in self-isolation as an anchoress. Her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, is the earliest surviving book in the English language by a woman, and, after all she went through, she still was able to say, "All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".

*Hanneke van der Heijden,  
Anne Larchet and Juliane Wammen*



**Hanneke van der Heijden** is a literary translator and interpreter from Turkish into Dutch, and writes about *literature from Turkey*.

**Photo: Private Archive**



**Anne Larchet** is a freelance interpreter and translator from Spanish to English.

**Photo: Martin de Haan**



**Juliane Wammen** is an award-winning literary translator from English, Norwegian and Swedish into Danish.

**Photo: Tim Flohr Sørensen**

# “This system has to change”

## Valeria Pulignano on the precarious situation of translators

Hanneke van der Heijden

*“The coronavirus has not only attacked vulnerable individuals – it has highlighted how Europe’s atrophying social ties leave a growing precariat exposed,” says Valeria Pulignano in a recent [article](#). And translators are among them. Counterpoint spoke with Pulignano, Professor of Sociology at the University of Leuven (Belgium), about her research into working conditions of translators and other precarious workers, and the effects of the Corona-crisis.*

It is the end of March when we have our interview on Skype instead of in person, as originally planned – trains to Leuven have been cancelled due to lockdown measures. These same measures have also had an effect on the international study Pulignano and a team of researchers began in October 2019. Data collection, scheduled for April 2020, is for the time being partly done by online interviews. Meanwhile, the topic of the research has become more visible than ever. “Paradoxically, Corona brings to light the full extent of the precarious situation of translators and other people in similar working conditions,” Pulignano remarks. “The

Covid-19 crisis magnifies the distortions imposed by neoliberal ideology on the socio-economic system. The question is how people will be affected.”

The research project [ResPecTMe](#) will investigate the precarious working and living conditions in eight European countries of people with so-called ‘non-standard employment arrangements’: people, in other words, who work without the “good, old-fashioned, full-time, open-ended employment contract”. Literary and commercial translators are among the professionals included in the study. Sharing their precarious working and living conditions with a large group of other people, they work in such diverse fields as arts and culture, the care industry and the gig economy, ranging from journalists and ballet dancers to nurses, Upwork freelancers and Deliveroo riders. The number of people working without a contract or with an atypical contract has grown exponentially, especially after the financial crisis of 2008, when people were strongly encouraged to ‘be flexible’ and go into self-employment. Thus, a category

that for a long time mainly applied to people working in high-end professions such as lawyers, private doctors and architects has over the last years become much bigger and much more diverse, whereas the socio-economic position of workers in this category has become much more precarious.

### Bogus self-employment

Formally, translators have always been categorised as self-employed. It is precisely this status which currently prohibits them from obtaining collective bargaining rights. But this is a misclassification, says Pulignano, especially now: “Translators are dependent on work that’s commissioned to them. It is bogus self-employment, since their income is based on a client – provider relationship, that is, a subordinate relationship, which would actually require a formal employment.”

Two more factors add to translators’ precariousness: the unpredictability of new assignments, and unpaid work. Looking into the relationship between precariousness and the unpredictability of work, and uncovering the increasing amount of unpaid activities that underlie paid work, are among the goals of Pulignano’s study. In the field of literary translation, unpaid activities include writing book reports, correcting texts for book covers or catalogues, assisting in promotional activities once a translation is published etc. And when translation fees are too low to make a living, which is often the case, even part of the translation work can be considered to be unpaid work. Pulignano: “In the creative industries people are often prepared to do unpaid or underpaid work out of commitment and love for their

profession. As a result of socialisation, it’s sometimes also deemed normal not to get paid for certain types of work. But most of all people are dependent on new assignments. By doing work for free, they hope to acquire what Bourdieu called ‘social capital’: a social network which might enable them to find other assignments.”

“**Competition is high, people are eating each other**”

The fact that translators only get paid once a book is handed in to the publisher puts additional stress on their economic situation. The long months translators spend working on a book before they receive their fee, and the often modest remuneration waiting at the end of a translation project, force many translators to take on side jobs in order to survive. The online world of commercial translations could offer possibilities for additional income. “But this is an extremely liberalised, deregulated world. There are no fixed prices, but at the same time minimum standards are lacking and required entry qualifications are very low (for most fields of translation there’s no certification). As a consequence, practically anyone can throw himself into the struggle for an assignment. Companies pay no taxes and can always find cheaper labour. Competition is high, people are eating each other.”



### Markets and mental state

Meanwhile, circumstances in the offline world of book translations have changed too, and very radically so. Pulignano describes how increased competition and a growing deregulation of the market have resulted in uncertainty and loss of bargaining power for translators. In some countries like Sweden the effects are deepened by the abolishment of fixed book prices resulting in a book market which shows a huge imbalance of power. A few big players, such as large publishing chains, occupy a central position in the market and exert an enormous power, whereas translators are left with hardly any influence. They have no collective bargaining rights, no working guarantees nor (social) protection such as adequate unemployment benefits and paid sick leave. They have, in short, none of the rights or guarantees people with an employment contract usually benefit from.

***“We should rethink the concept of work, the way we live and work”***

The EU’s role in all this is problematic, Pulignano says. “European competition law, which traditionally focused on safeguarding competition on product markets, doesn’t fit the current market. An individual who works freelance is

considered to be an undertaking, an autonomous economic entity, offering services and bearing the financial risk of it, but the working conditions of the freelancer are not taken into account. Unless EU legislation is adapted in such a way that it protects translators and others who are misclassified as self-employed, it will consolidate or even strengthen the present imbalance of power, and thus make their situation even more precarious.”

When it comes to the impact of precarious working conditions, economic aspects are often in the foreground. But the effects are so much more pervasive: the instability created by precariousness affects and shapes a person’s whole life. Pulignano: “What about having children, for example, or taking out a mortgage when your income can drop at any moment and there’s no predictability of work? What does it mean in terms of respect when you have to do work that’s unpaid?” In order to get a full overview of what exactly precariousness means, Pulignano and her team will not use a ready-made definition of precariousness as their starting point but will instead ask their informants to tell them how they experience it. Using narrative interview techniques, the researchers will look at how precarious working conditions shape people’s life and work trajectory.

### Towards a truly sustainable society

Just as precariousness affects the life of an individual, it also has an impact on the economy and society at large. “In our societies, where things are measured according to their economic value, no pay equals no value. By definition, unpaid work (and this includes underpaid work) is part of the informal





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**Valeria Pulignano**  
**Photo: Private Archive**

economy. It is, in other words, not visible, not respected and not reflected in indexes such as the GDP, an indicator for economic growth. Formally speaking, unpaid work simply doesn't exist.”

The economic and societal impact of this has become even more problematic now that the number of the bogus self-employed and other people working under non-standard arrangements has increased so dramatically. “A crisis like the Covid-19 that we're experiencing now, shows that the system is not sustainable. One thing we shouldn't forget,” adds Pulignano with emphasis: “Economic uncertainty relates to social uncertainty. Protecting the health and social conditions of workers as individuals and citizens cannot be seen as trading off against economic growth. This makes for an essential policy argument at both local, national and EU-level: protecting workers also means protecting companies.” More balanced power relationships in the market will result in more equality and ensure more equal

access to socio-economic resources. This will not only help translators (and others working in precarious conditions). Small and medium-sized enterprises, such as publishing houses, will benefit from it as well.

Thus, the Covid-19 crisis might offer possibilities for a system change. “As a sociologist, I want to give something back to society,” Pulignano says. On a more practical level, the results of her study will be used for awareness-raising workshops all over Europe. But Pulignano thinks bigger than that. “The present crisis shows very clearly that our system is not sustainable. We should rethink the concept of work, the way we live and work. We should discuss how to organise society as a whole in such a way that it will be sustainable. This system has to change.”

# Teaching literary translation:

*How it is and how it could be*

**Teodora Tzankova**

CEATL's Training and Education working group was formed in 2009 as a tool for attracting attention to the state of affairs of the training and education of literary translators across Europe. The group consists of seven members, the majority of whom joined recently: Dalma Galambos (Hungary), Teresa Pradera (Basque Country), Silvana Roglic (second Croatian delegate), Brigitte Saramago (Portugal), Vesna Stamenković (Serbia), Françoise Wuilmart (honorary member, Belgium) and myself as coordinator of the group since 2018. Lara Hölbling Matković (Croatia) is our connection to the Board. We organise our work via emails and Skype and meet, if possible, twice a year.

At the time of its constitution, all members of the working group taught literary translation at university level alongside their avocation as literary translators. Although some changes have taken place over the course of the last ten years, it is, I think, this combination of activities which lies at the heart of our shared ideas. We all believe in the importance of teaching literary translation, especially in times like ours

when the quality of literary translation is often neglected for the sake of speed, demanded by the market. We are also convinced of the fruitfulness of relations between academia and non-academia, as well as of the interdependence of theory and practice. A literary translator may or may not have a passion for theory but, either way, they should be aware of the reasons behind their particular choices and of the consequences of these choices.

Due to the heterogeneous panorama of training and education in literary translation in Europe between 2009 and 2016, the working group devoted its efforts to two projects: 1) a Report on Training and Education in Literary Translation in the European countries represented in CEATL (coordinated by Katarina Bednarova from the Slovak Republic and Françoise Wuilmart from Belgium). The report covers academic and non-academic practices and analyses the advantages and disadvantages of the current situation (i.e. c. 2014). The report concludes with a list of general recommendations; 2) the PETRA-E, a joint European project (where the working group was



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**Teodora Tzankova**  
**Photo: Iva Manova**

represented by Françoise Wuilmart and myself), which resulted in a general **Framework of Reference for the Education and Training of Literary Translators**, comprising a competence-based model and a learning line.

**“There is a gap between an excellent idea and a manageable project”**

Today, the PETRA-E Network (of which CEATL is a member) aims at promoting and implementing the Framework. Between 2017 and 2019 the working group, coordinated by Kateřina Klabanova (**Czech Republic**), explored the possibility for a new, more practically oriented project, entitled ‘Small is Great’, that focused on training for translators

from small languages. The main goal was to develop an effective model (based on the PETRA-E Framework) for enhancing the promotional competences of literary translators, strengthen their mobility, stimulate networking, and boost circulation of small-language literatures. Unfortunately, the project turned out to be too large for us to manage and was not meant to be. The story of the Small is Great project can be told as a failure but also, I hope, as a lesson learnt: there is a gap between an excellent idea and a manageable project, and vast amounts of enthusiasm, energy and well-disposed colleagues all over Europe are not always enough to bridge it.

Now the working group is in the process of looking for new inspirations and enterprises to undertake, possibly with a focus on mobility. We look to the future with optimism and a maintained focus on furthering the education and training of literary translators in Europe.

# My homeland is translation

*A story of falling in love*

**Malika Embarek Lopez**

I'd like to begin with an explanation of my choice of title for this article. What do I mean by translation? What do I mean by homeland? And what do I mean by falling in love?

Even though I also translate contracts, birth certificates, wills, and business texts, when I talk about translation I mean literary translation.

By homeland I don't mean the homeland in the motto *Todo por la patria* ('Everything for the homeland') over the entrances to military barracks in Spain. Nor do I mean *Allah, al-watan, al-malik* ('God, homeland, king'), written in enormous letters on a hill that can sometimes be made out in the distance from a road in Morocco.

The homeland I mean echoes many writers in different ways – Juan Goytisolo and Juan Gelman 'My homeland is language', Thomas Mann 'My homeland is the German language', Fernando Pessoa 'My homeland is the Portuguese language', Albert Camus 'The French language is my homeland' and Jorge Semprun

'Language is my homeland'. All these authors have, in one way or another, been touched by their experience as displaced people, either in their own country or another, as Edward Said so aptly described in *Reflections on Exile*:

"Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment."

## A place of freedom

So, this is the terrain of translation. As the daughter of a Christian Spaniard and a Muslim Moroccan, from a young age I have moved between two (and sometimes more) languages, two cultures, two religions. This toing and froing, which led me, in the most natural way, to my profession, instilled in me a consideration for the other, the



different. That is precisely what the task of translation is about – that hospitable, free territory where the only boundaries are respect for the reader and for the authors' words, culture, and language which feed into my work as translator.

My homeland could be described in the same way as Carlos Fuentes describes the novel in *Geografía de la novela* "the common ground of the imagination and the word, where those denied can come together and tell the stories forbidden by the deniers." As such, a place of freedom.



**'Alaroza's' hennaed hand**  
**Photo: Salima Abdelwahab**

My homeland is a territory where through my efforts (based on those of the author) I can take up Michal Ignatieff's idea of having a black person

read a white person, a woman a man, a child an adult, a believer an atheist, a heterosexual a homosexual. And the greatest satisfaction is that the reader of my translation can be touched in the same way as the reader of the original.

## “Writers then resort to the translators' tools”

That universality of translation, which is achieved without wiping out the identity of the original text, is also related to, or at least I like to think it is, the universality of Sufi mysticism, which manifests itself through the acknowledgement of the other. When, as in my case, we find ourselves among texts by Maghrebi authors from an Islamic background, we need this universalism as an antidote against ideologies which are exclusive and excluding and which, out of ignorance and fanaticism, despise the other.

### Writers using the translators' tools

And now for the third element in the title of my article – falling in love. This refers to the passionate love I feel for my mother's language, Spanish, and my father's, Moroccan Arabic, or *darija*, which has no written form. Darija finds itself in that anomalous linguistic situation of diglossia, as is the case in other Arabic-speaking countries, where a language that only has a written register, classical Arabic, coexists with mother tongues that are exclusively oral. In



**Almacabra in Morocco with the Spanish coastline in the background**

**Photo: Yasmina Embarek Lopez**

many cases this has led some Maghrebi writers to opt for writing in French, the language of their ex-coloniser and whose literature I have been translating into Spanish since the mid-1980s.

Many Maghrebi francophone writers find it difficult to be corseted in classical Arabic which has no oral register, as it isn't spoken in everyday life in any Arab country. In those moments when the narrator needs, especially in novels, to assert their identity, through Arab and Islamic cultural references, French just isn't sufficient. Writers then resort to the translators' tools: equivalence, modification, adaptation, transliteration, use of italics or bold, footnotes or glossaries. In these instances, the author *translates*. These hybrid texts require the translator to employ new strategies.

The translator into Spanish, on the other hand, has the advantage of being able to draw on more than 2,000 words of Arab origin, most of them now archaic, as those who last used

them were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula by the beginning of the 16th century. Since then, in Spain there are no longer any *almacabras* ('cemeteries') to bury Muslims in. Weddings where the

**“For the translator into Spanish, it is a matter of rescuing these Arabisms”**

*alarozas* ('young brides') apply *alheña* ('henna') to their hands are no longer celebrated, and there are no more *adules*, the notaries who registered the *acidaque* ('dowry'), the thirteen coins given by





**Malika Embarek Lopez** is a translator from French and Arabic into Spanish with a background and education on both the European and North African shores of the Mediterranean. Of the 70 or more books she has translated the latest include works by Leïla Slimani, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mohamed Chukri and Meryem Alaoui. She was awarded the Gerardo de Cremona International Translation Prize in 2015 and the Spanish National Prize for the Work of a Translator in 2017.

**Malika Embarek Lopez**  
**Photo: Private Archive**

the bridegroom to the bride. Women no longer cover themselves with *jaiques* ('long cloaks'), the five daily *azalás* ('prayers') are no longer intoned and the profession of *alfajeme* ('barber') who circumcised boys, has disappeared.

### Rescuing Arabisms

However, on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, where those expelled from Al-Andalus settled a long time ago, all these terms are still in use in the 21st century in the vernacular mother tongue of the francophone author. They correspond almost exactly to the meaning that the author doesn't have in French: *le cimetière musulman* ('almacabra'), *la jeune mariée* ('alaroza'), *le sdaq* ('acidaque'), *le haïk* ('jaïque'), *la prière* ('azalá'), *le coiffeur-exécutant* ('alfajeme') etc.

So, for the translator into Spanish, it is really a matter of rescuing these Arabisms in Spanish and giving them a new lease of life in the contemporary literary texts of Maghrebi writers in French. The strategy is to offer the author hospitality, make them feel at home in the translated text, so that

the Arab voices are integrated and can be heard, anew, in the translation. The reader in Spanish can perceive this sense of foreignness, as well as its authenticity and legitimacy because it is part of their linguistic heritage.

It has been in this translation territory of mestizo (like myself) texts where I have been able to freely embrace with love my two languages and I feel very grateful to the writers I have translated, Edmond Amran El Maleh, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Abdelwahab Meddeb and Leïla Slimani who have taught me a lot about myself.

*Translation from the Spanish  
original by Anne Larchet*

## OUT AND ABOUT

# From Albania to Bulgaria

## *Six questions to Milena Selimi*

### Where did you stay and for how long?

In July 2019, I was offered the translation residency at [Sofia Literature and Translation House](#) in Sofia, Bulgaria. This residency was supported by [TRADUKI](#) and lasted for a month. During this time, I had the great pleasure of working and living in the former residence of the Bulgarian artist, Nenko Balkanski. Living in an artistic space like this was the perfect environment to develop my artistic expression and to produce my best possible work.

### What project did you work on?

During the residency, I had the opportunity to translate *Physics of Sorrow*, a book by the famous author Georgi Gospodinov, from Bulgarian into Albanian. Its publication in Albanian was made possible by a grant from Creative Europe. *Fizika e Trishtimit* was published in Albania in November 2019, by the publisher ALBAS.

### In what way did your stay at the translators' house contribute to your translation project?

Literature is a connecting bridge. It is the only space where people from different

cultures and nationalities are connected through storytelling and through the essences of being human. Literature is a breath of freedom within each and every one of us, no matter where we are from. While staying at the translators' house, I felt right at home. As a translator, I felt like I was contributing to the continuation of this legacy.

### What was the biggest challenge of your translation project?

The biggest challenge was definitely trying to preserve the original structure of the sentences used by the author. Albanian (*Shqip*) is an Indo-European language and is not closely related to any other language. The order of words in Albanian is quite free, but the most used order is subject-verb-object. In contrast, the style used by the author Georgi Gospodinov doesn't really follow Bulgarian grammar rules.

### Did you have contact with any other authors/artists during your stay?

Yes, and without doubt, these meetings were the highlight of my entire residency. My most valuable encounter was definitely with the author



**Translators' House in Sofia**  
**Photo: Milena Selimi**

Gospodinov himself. We talked about and discussed the different phrases used in the book, the front cover, concept etc. As a translator, I deeply value these kinds of meetings with authors, and I was very lucky to be able to do so in Sofia. Another important meeting took place at the Kliment Ohridski University where I had the chance to meet Professor Dr. Rusana Beileri in person in the Albanian language section of the department of Balkan Studies. During this meeting we had an informal discussion with several Bulgarian students interested in Albanian language and culture. The meeting I had with the playwright, Elin Rahnev, was particularly special, as I was the translator of the play, 'Bean', which will be premiered in Albania at the end of this year, hopefully with the

author himself being present. While in Sofia I had the opportunity to catch up with my old colleagues Rusanka Lyapova and Zhela Georgieva, two well-known translators of Balkan languages.

**How is the position of literary translators in Albania different from that of your colleagues in Bulgaria?**

Being a translator in Albania, and the same in Bulgaria, means that you are continuously struggling to survive. Neither country has invested enough in translation or translators, and even less with regard to smaller Balkan languages. Public interest in literary authors from the Balkans is low as English, French and German authors dominate the literary market. The only way Balkan languages can stay alive is





**Milena Selimi** has had a long career as a journalist, writer and editor and has worked with national and international organizations as coordinator and moderator. A graduate of the University of Tirana with a degree in Albanian Language and Literature, and also fluent in Bulgarian, Italian, Macedonian and Serbian, she has translated novels by writers such as: Nikola Madzirov, Alek Popov, Georgi Gospodinov, Milen Ruskov and many more. Currently she is the Director of the **Centre for Openness and Dialogue** at the Prime Minister's Office in Tirana, Albania.

**Milena Selimi**

**Photo: Katya Barulova**

through European platforms such as **Creative Europe**, different networks like TRADUKI, and translation grants for Balkan languages given by the different Ministries of Culture in the region. As a translator for TRADUKI since 2009, I can't express enough how this network has been, and will forever be, the main door to the European Union. It's the perfect integration model where EU member states, particularly those in charge of different policies such as Germany, can find that common ground and perfect balance for collaboration with potential EU candidates such as Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Serbia. Culture builds bridges that politics can never aspire to. Both people living in Western Europe and those living in the western Balkans know this well. I wonder if the different governments know this too. Now is the time of culture. As Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union purportedly said: "If I were to do it again, I would start with culture".

**“The only way  
Balkan languages  
can stay alive is  
through European  
platforms”**

# Translators down the Covid hole

*Eva Valvo*

During the first days of lockdown in Italy the ‘translators’ bubble’ on social media was full of memes and funny comments about the fact that nothing had really changed for literary translators, as their daily life has always been a life in isolation. That idea didn’t last long.

As I write this article at the beginning of April, schools have been closed for six weeks and the Government’s lockdown measures have been gradually increasing and ended up being among the strictest in Europe. The economic impact will be hard, while Covid-19 claims victims every day. The stress levels among translators began to rise – people were lamenting their inability to read, translate or concentrate. When I asked for help with this article within my association, I was surprised by the number of messages from colleagues sharing their thoughts and emotions. I am quoting some of them without revealing their names, and I wish to thank them all for their insights.

## **Mother translators**

Mothers spend most of the day on childcare and homeschooling.

One colleague wrote, “I have three children and I am being continuously interrupted. They need constant help with their online school platform, with printing, scanning, sending homework... Teachers do tremendous work, but all this is driving me crazy.” Another mother wrote, “Apparently my work has not changed, as I am still sitting at my desk at home, but everything around me has transformed.

**“A huge concern about the future is undermining our ability for creative endeavour”**

Do you really believe that working from home and childcare are compatible?” And another one, “At first, I thought



it was because I had a million things to do with my husband and three children at home all day, but now I believe it's something else. I am translating a children's book that requires creativity and humor, but I cannot write. It's as if the book's story was meaningless compared to what is happening out there."

A huge concern about the future, both of the publishing industry and the whole world, is undermining our ability for creative endeavour. Someone said to me, "My brain doesn't work and I can't even write an email or a chat message without making mistakes." And another, "I saw a Facebook picture of some Chinese doctors who came to Italy to help, and it felt like a slap in the face. There are people out there doing something useful, but what am I doing?" Such a sense of futility is not uncommon. "I've always felt with the characters of the novels that I translate, sharing their hopes and worries, but now a voice in my head tells me that it's fake. I have become a slower translator, and a worse one. But I hope to find again that fiction is truth, because I know that literature is life."

### Compulsive news watching

Such isolation is paradoxical, as we're probably more connected than ever. An extraordinary information overload of scientific explanations, statistics, or fake news about the virus is swarming in our brains and draining our energy, not to mention the well-meaning suggestions about how to spend our quarantine. One translator said, "I am distracted by compulsively reading the news, but also by all the phone and video calls with family and friends."

Another one wrote, "There's a million online initiatives that make me feel inadequate because I can't do anything. I feel as if I had less time, not more."



*Alice down the rabbit hole (from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Cassell and Co. 1907).  
Illustrator: Charles Robinson*





*Eva Valvo, a literary translator from Danish and Norwegian into Italian, is a board member of [Strade](#), the literary translators' union in Italy.*

**Eva Valvo**  
**Photo: Peter Ciaccio**

Fortunately, not everyone is affected by this 'translator's block'. A colleague told me, "In spite of all this, I translate. I never stop. Translation is my only window, the only open horizon for all of us. I'm sure that it will be the only thing that will eventually heal us. As always." If we are to learn something from this collective shock, it might be that we need to cherish our time and that literary translation, like all creative work, needs time and care. We're used to pressing deadlines, rushing from one book fair to the next, but we must not forget our main task – creating world literature that can heal souls, even in critical times.

***"Translation is my only window, the only open horizon for all of us"***

Believing in the healing power of words, CEATL and its Italian members Strade and AITI promoted a joint project with FIT and the Bologna Children's Book Fair, by translating a Coronavirus-rhyme by Italian author Roberto Piumini into some thirty languages. You can find it online as a message of hope among the resources of the Bologna Book Fair's [online special edition](#).

*Words are presents, words are seeds,  
they're gifts that we have plenty of  
and if they're good they're all we need,  
when we're apart, to grow our love.*

(From "Is There Something in the Air?" by Roberto Piumini, translated by Leah Janeczko)

## NOTES FROM EUROPE: SERBIA

# Protecting translators' rights

*Vladimir D. Janković*

The Association of Literary Translators of Serbia ([Udruženje književnih prevodilaca Srbije – UKPS](#)) was founded in 1951 in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and then Yugoslavia. From the very beginning, and in the following decades, ALTS was the leading association of literary translators in Yugoslavia. It was at the initiative of the ALTS that in 1953 the Federation of Literary Translators of Yugoslavia was founded. Its first president was Živojin Simić, then president of ALTS. This federation became a member of the International Translators' Organization – FIT ([Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs](#)).

The Association of Literary Translators of Serbia is a not-for-profit trade organization whose main goals are the promotion of literary translation, the protection and representation of literary translators and their copyrights, as well as the exchange of experiences, and developing and fostering connections with cultures and translators of other nations.

### Changing challenges

Facing both extremely difficult economic circumstances as well as unfavourable social conditions since the early nineties, ALTS' role and work have become not only more delicate but also more important and thus more visible. The collapse of the value system has resulted in a radical deterioration of the environment in which all artists, including literary translators, live and work, as well as further aggravating their position – even though this position ought to be guaranteed both by domestic and international legal acts defining the rights and the obligations of literary translators.

As an institution primarily oriented towards the protection of the rights of its members, but also of other literary translators, those who are not members of ALTS, our Association is also focused on the treatment of literary translators in the media. Unfortunately, it is not unusual that the names and the creative integrity of literary translators are utterly ignored in media presentations. ALTS therefore constantly takes the



**Vladimir D. Janković** is a Serbian literary translator, poet and essayist, and vice-president of the ALTS/UKPS. He has published more than 200 literary translations, of which 95 novels, from French or English into Serbian. Janković is the author of four books of poetry and more than 500 poems, essays, short stories and press notes, and his translations include works by Michel Houellebecq, Hilary Mantel, Frédéric Beigbeder, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Ann Enright, Jean-Michel Guénassia and Leïla Slimani.

**Vladimir D. Janković**  
**Photo: Ksenija Vlatković**

appropriate measures in order to prevent or remedy the consequences of some media professionals' incorrect and unprofessional attitude towards the art and the importance of literary translation.

### **Publishing and gatherings**

Today, the Association has about 350 members. Despite many difficulties, it has been maintaining its publishing activities, acclaimed by its elite literary translation magazine *The Bridges* (*Mostovi*). In addition to *The Bridges*, there is also *The ALTS Bulletin*, a regularly issued publication with the latest information on the Association's activities.

Among other regular activities of the ALTS, the traditional Belgrade Translators' Meetings (*Beogradski prevodilački susreti, BEPS*), which take place every year and bring together distinguished translators and Slavists from Europe and the world, are of particular importance. The ALTS also organizes a regular panel – the Translators' Salon. At these gatherings, the work of renowned

literary translators and exceptional translation projects are presented to both professionals and the general public.

Under the auspices of and in collaboration with the ALTS, many prestigious prizes in the field of literary translation are awarded. Particularly significant are those named after renowned literary translators Miloš N. Djurić, Branko Jelić, Radoje Tatić, Jovan Maksimović, Ljubiša Rajić, Mihajlo Djordjević, as well as the ALTS Lifetime Achievement Award.

The governing bodies of the ALTS consist of the Managing Board, the International Cooperation and BEPS Committee, the Status Committee, the Supervisory Board and the Court of Honour. Since January 2018, the most senior positions in the Managing Board have been held by Duško Paunković (President), Vladimir D. Janković (Vice-President) and Neda Nikolić Bobić (Secretary General).

## ME AND MY DICTIONARY

# Needed and needy:

## *My dictionary out of dictionaries*

**Tuncay Birkan**

For 30 years I have been translating or publishing books, mostly in the field of social sciences and humanities. So I am both a translator and an editor, although in Turkey the job description of an 'editor' is quite elastic. You are supposed to deal with almost everything that has to be done in a publishing house. Firstly, you have to discover the books to be published from the mountainous pile of books or from the even taller pile of catalogues on the publisher's desk. Then, gradually, you are supposed to create your own 'series' and find the 'right' translators for the books you choose. You yourself have to write or phone them and the publishers all over the world. But, in the eyes of the average Turkish publisher, these are all 'side dishes', so to speak, i.e. nothing worthy of the mighty name 'job' and therefore, nothing worthy of separate and decent payment! Most importantly, you have to revise as many translations as possible to justify your salary. You can easily take care of all the other things some other time – preferably when you are at home.

And revise I did! Some books I had to revise so much that I now have quite

a number of 'secret' translations published under other names in addition to the over 50 books officially translated by myself. Luckily, this comedy was mostly limited to my first editorial years. Things did not go on like this because at some point I started to work with more able translators whom I myself chose. I no longer had to dedicate the greater part of my daily work to fixing basic problems related to Turkish syntax and/or decoding the intricacies of advanced English. In fact all editors must have encountered similar problems in almost every language. But one problem which I think is exclusive to the Turkish context continued to create serious problems for me – I am talking about the problem of finding or agreeing on the exact equivalents of the concepts used in these books. And this had almost nothing to do with the translators' competence and everything to do with the vicissitudes of Turkish political history.

### **Language as a political hot-spot**

This may sound crazy to you but it really was the case! To cut a long story short – in the early 1930s the young Turkish Republic wished to radically



cut ties with its Ottoman past, and the regime adopted, in Auerbach's words, "a fanatically anti-traditional nationalism, a rejection of all existing Mohammedan cultural heritage, and the establishment of fantastic relations with a primal Turkish identity". As part of this craze, a 'newspeak' was created – almost all of the words that Turkish had borrowed from Persian and Arabic over a thousand years were suspect and they were to be replaced with the 'pure Turkish' ones that were mostly 'invented' overnight.

## ***“language and problems of terminology were hot points of debate in the newspapers”***

Of course, everything didn't go as smoothly as the regime wanted. A significant portion of the intelligentsia had to develop an ambivalent stance – while they publicly applauded the regime's bold manoeuvre and for a time tried to use these newly coined words as much as possible in their newspaper articles, they soon found it practically impossible to write comprehensibly using only these words. Even though most of them were sincerely pro-regime, they continued to resist this imposition, but wisely chose to do so without making a fuss. Meanwhile those of them who were actively enlisted

in various government commissions produced a series of specific dictionaries and glossaries full of these state-sanctioned words which were then used widely in schools and, more significantly for our purposes, in the translations of the Western classics which the Ministry of Education published throughout the 1940s.

In fact, for almost 12 years after Atatürk died in 1938, language and problems of terminology were hot points of debate in the newspapers but a balance of sorts was reached towards the end of the 1940s. This balance was upset by the Democratic Party (DP) which came to power in 1950. Their 'organic intellectuals', in a spirit of revanchism, started to practically ban the use of new words and to write in a highly stylized Ottoman Turkish that new generations hardly understood. In the ten years of their rule the DP gradually tightened its grip on the left-wing intellectuals as they grew extremely vulnerable to their criticisms. Their anti-intellectual stance had grown so oppressive that most of these intellectuals applauded the coup d'état that ended their rule in 1960.

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, most of the words in Turkish were charged with an overdose of political significance. According to the generally-held consensus, the words that had an Arabic or Persian origin were deemed 'right-wing' while the 'pure Turkish' ones were seen, in a curious irony of history, as 'left-wing'. Everyone tried to avoid using the words belonging to 'the others' while writing, translating or even speaking. This utterly irrational, even absurd rigidity, which is the product of a painful past, only started to loosen in

the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Even nowadays there are a few critics who may scold you for using both kinds of words in your translation, but they are fortunately, thank God, a minority!

### Needed dictionary turned out to be needy

However, in this period, a lot of specialist dictionaries were published with this mind-set for various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology etc. And translators had to use these with considerable caution because they either contained words that couldn't find currency even within the 'purist' circles or words that had long since lost their intelligibility for most rightwing intellectuals! In either case, these words of little communicative value could seriously undermine the comprehensibility of the already difficult works we published. As well as that, you sometimes had to deform decent Turkish syntax and produce monstrous sentences merely by insisting on using such words.

I started to prepare the 'Needy Dictionary' mainly to address this problem. I wanted to help the mostly young translators I worked with to decide on whether the words they might see in a dictionary were still in active use. For example they might have thought that *başsızcı* (literally, 'the one who want no leaders') was a valid option for rendering 'anarchist' in Turkish, while it was not, as no one used it, except the person who coined it – even my grandmother simply said 'anarşist'! Such words as *başsızcı* were underlined in my primitive dictionary.

They might also have seen words such as *ekin* ('culture'), *ulam* ('category'),

*edimci* ('actor') and *bulunç* ('conscience') which purists insisted on using for a long time, even though they failed to gain currency. I wanted to explain that we preferred to use *kültür*, *kategori*, *aktör* and *vicdan* in their stead since these were widely understood.

I added proper names in brackets to some concepts in order to give the translators a sense of context (i.e. 'bricolage: *yaptakçılık* (Lévi-Strauss)' or 'estrangement: *yadırgatma* (Russian Formalism)'). And finally there were a lot of concepts for which satisfactory Turkish equivalents were still to be found.



**'Beware of words'. Mural in Paris by Ben**  
**Photo: Ros Schwartz**





**Tuncay Birkan**, Turkish translator from English and editor, has translated nearly 50 books in the field of social sciences and humanities. He worked as an editor in *Ayrıntı* (1992–1996) and *Metis* (2004–2017), and was one of the founders and first chairman of the Turkish Translators' Association **ÇEVİRİ** (2006–2008). Birkan's essays on politics and literature have been published in various journals and websites and in 2019 he published the book *Dünya ile Devlet Arasında Türk Muharriri. 1930–1960* ('The Turkish Author Between the World and the State. 1930–1960').

**Tuncay Birkan**  
**Photo: Aslı Biçen**

I included problematic concepts as well, but added '??' to indicate that we 'needed' to find better words for these and that they were all welcome to propose anything that 'needed' to be included in the dictionary. Hence the name 'Needy Dictionary'!

Since the middle of the 1990s a lot of people have contributed to this humble dictionary, especially in the 2000s when we translators started to talk to each other a lot about building an association that would protect our rights. We also consulted with each other about terminology problems and as a result the scope of our 'Needy One' has widened considerably! In the last ten years there have been almost no significant contributions, because the urgency of the terminology problem has gradually diminished thanks to the relative stability and consensus that have been reached over the years. In retrospect, I like to think that my all-too-humble efforts in the immense field of lexicography played a small role in this stabilisation process, which is why I am a bit partial to this dictionary!

**“Since the middle of the 1990s a lot of people have contributed to this humble dictionary”**

# CEATL's Click List

## *Links to the world of translation*

### European book translators and Covid-19

After Covid-19 pushed most European countries into lockdown and CEATL had to cancel its annual meeting, which was scheduled to take place next May in Brussels, CEATL's newpage collected reactions from translators all over Europe on how the Corona-crisis has affected their working conditions. Click [here](#) to find an overview with surprising insights, and ideas on how to help vulnerable colleagues.

### Yiddish: Seven lives moving between languages and countries

Nurith Aviv is one of the few film directors who choose language as a topic for their documentaries. After her trilogy about different aspects of Hebrew (including *Traduire*, an inspiring documentary about translating Hebrew texts into other languages), Aviv recently brought out a new documentary: *Yiddish*. In it seven young people tell about their love for Yiddish avant-



Screenshot from the trailer of *Yiddish*

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NcBeIGAnBw>

garde poetry from the interbellum, and show how their lives move between different countries and languages. Click [here](#) for a trailer of Yiddish.

### Translators saving the world

2018 Nobel Prize winning author Olga Tokarczuk published her speech together with her essay 'Wie Übersetzer die Welt retten' ('How translators save the world'). The book is published by Swiss publishing house [Kampa Verlag](#).

### International database of book translations

UNESCO's Index Translationum is an international bibliography of literary and non-fiction translations. Created in 1932, the database contains cumulative bibliographical information on published book translations in some hundred of UNESCO's member states between 1979 and 2009. The [database](#), dependent on updates from UNESCO's member countries, can provide interesting information. For analyses on the statistics in this database, see, for example, [this one](#) by Literature across Frontiers.



*Olga Tokarczuk, 2017*

*Photo: [Martin Kraft](#), by license CC BY-SA 3.0*

# Colophon

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