

SPECIAL FEATURE:  
MACHINE  
TRANSLATION

# Counterpoint

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CEATL's European Literary  
Translators' E-zine

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# From the editors

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While preparing this new issue of *Counterpoint*, a fascinating book came to mind: the facsimile of a 12th-century manuscript, written in the region that used to be called Upper Mesopotamia. In this text the author, İsmail al-Jazari, who some believe was a source of inspiration for Da Vinci, describes and draws a large number of mechanical devices he invented for daily use – a hand-washing automaton with flush mechanism for ritual ablutions, a boat with machines that look like musicians playing the saz, a servant filling your cup whenever your drink is about to run out.

Machines doing work for human beings have stimulated human imagination for a very long time. And just as much as machines have been the subject of desire, they have also invariably been approached with caution. What if their effects turn out differently to what had been envisaged?

As literary translators, we might be confronted with a game-changing machine sooner than we thought. Colleagues who (also) work as commercial translators have already

for quite a while experienced the radical changes machine translation entails. When it comes to the translation of literary texts, the question of how useful machines could be has for a long time been met with cynicism. But recent developments show that machine translation could very well become part of a literary translator's life in the not too distant future.

What would that be like, what would it entail? Would it be 'game over' for literary translators? Will they be turned into high-end editors, correcting machine-produced errors? Will translators still be able to engage with the author's voice in a text in the same way as before, when there's also the machine's voice to be dealt with? What about the copyright of translators when a machine does part of the job?

Five contributors raise these and other intriguing questions in the special feature of our fourth issue: machine translation and literature.

James Hadley, researcher at Trinity College, Dublin, describes the

developments in machine translation that have taken place since the 1940s, and he clarifies the different principles that guide programmes such as Trados and Memo-Q on the one hand, and programmes working with neural systems like Google Translate and DeepL on the other. Two translators, Hans-Christian Oeser and Katja Zakrajšek, who have actually used different types of machine translation to translate literary texts, share their experiences. Researcher Waltraud Kolb is conducting an experimental study on decision-making in literary translation, and here in Counterpoint, she discusses her first results on differences in the cognitive processes involved in translating literature and in post-editing a machine-produced translation. And finally, Morten Visby, president of CEATL, reflects on the attitude among literary publishers towards machine translation and, among other things, the effects it might have in the domain of authors' rights.

But there is more. In addition to our special feature you'll find other stimulating contributions concerning developments within CEATL, and the world of translators at large – from the benefits of a dictionary of variants in German, to the political backdrop of the career of a Polish translator.

We hope you enjoy reading Counterpoint's latest issue and, as always, welcome your comments and suggestions at [editors@ceatl.eu](mailto:editors@ceatl.eu)

*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**

# My three languages

## *The political backdrop of a Polish translator's career*

**Hanna Jankowska**

I sometimes wonder if I still have the right to call myself a translator of Arabic? Yes, I graduated from Arabic studies at Warsaw University, and for nearly 20 years I worked as a translator and interpreter of this language (not every Oriental studies graduate was so lucky). I mention three languages on my CV: Arabic, English, Russian, but for the last 25 years I have rarely translated from Arabic. Since 2000, I have only translated two books, one of which is waiting to appear in print (*My Name Is Adam* by Elias Khoury) and several poems by an Iraqi poet, Hatif Janabi, who happens to be my colleague. More often I do fact checking of books about the Middle East for various editors.

I probably would have stayed with my profession as a translator of Arabic if it had not been for the changes in our part of the world.

It was not the fascination with the exotic that brought me to Arabic studies, not *Arabian Nights*, not an interest in Islam, but political events. In the six-day war of 1967, Poland, as well as other countries from the socialist camp “headed by

the Soviet Union”, supported the Arab countries. The declared and obligatory political support, however, did not go hand in hand with the dissemination of information about these countries. I wanted to know what the Middle East turmoil was really about, to read the press and literature from the rather unknown Arab side, to understand it and to present its arguments. And to do so, knowledge of the language was essential. So, I started to learn on my own with the *Teach Yourself Arabic* tutorial, a mimeographed textbook for language courses and the Arabic–Russian dictionary by Baranov. By the time I started my formal studies I could read a simple press article. The Arab press available at the time in Poland was the weekly *Al-Akhbar*, an organ of the Communist Party of Lebanon, which had quite a good cultural section. This is how I became acquainted with the poetry of the Palestinian resistance movement, which fascinated me, and these were thus my first exercises in translation.

While still a student, I managed to have some translations of poetry published in literary magazines, but my real



## “By translating Arabic literature, I hoped I would break entrenched stereotypes of the Arab world”

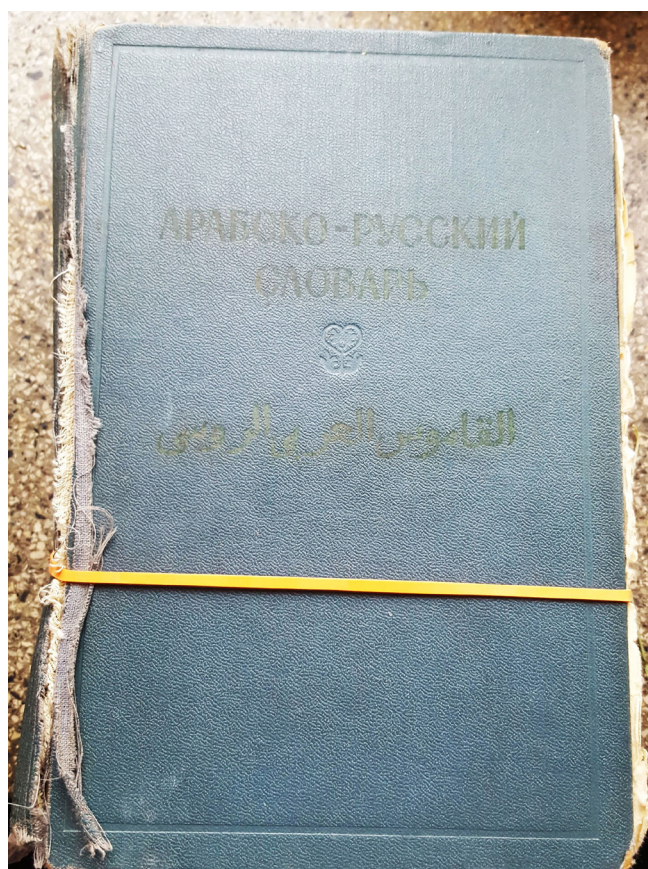
debut did not come until 1984: *Beirut Nightmares* by Ghada Samman. The book was very important to me, because a few years earlier I had worked as an interpreter for a group of wounded victims of the Lebanese Civil War who had come to Poland for treatment. Listening to their stories, I felt sorrow and helplessness. When I found out that such a book had come out, I did my best to get it. I proposed it to the [Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy \(PIW\)](#) publishing house which had greatly contributed to the promotion of world literature in Poland (it had published the full edition of *Arabian Nights* and the first modern translation of *Quran*).

The next book was offered to me by the same publishing house, and it too was a book of my dreams: *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* by Emile Habibi. A professor of Arabic studies, who had reviewed it for the publisher, declared it to be untranslatable due to its language full of puns, the local realities unknown to the Polish reader, and so on. But I dared to do it, and the book was received very well by reviewers in literary periodicals.

As it turned out later, my first three translated Arabic books were among the first 15 of the best hundred Arab novels selected by the [Arab Writers Union](#). The third was *Zayni Barakat* by Gamal Ghitani published in 1990. Shortly afterwards, I also completed the translation of this author's second book, *The Zafarani Files*, but PIW abandoned its publication for financial reasons. State funding was over.

### English taking over

At the beginning of the 1990s, not only political but also cultural priorities changed. Private publishing houses which mushroomed at that time tried to make up for lost time in presenting world literature to Polish readers. And “world” at that time meant mainly Anglo-American. The book market was flooded with crime novels, thrillers,

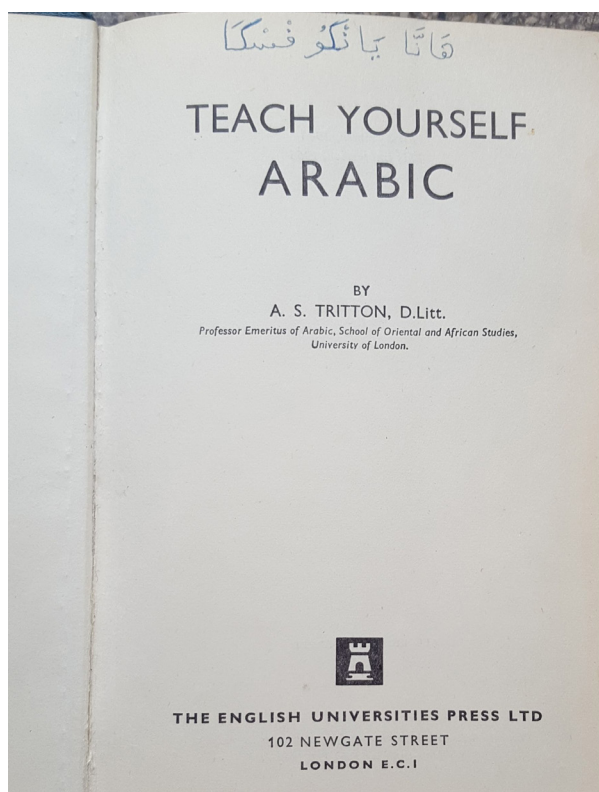


Copy of the old Baranov dictionary  
Photo: Hanna Jankowska

tear-jerkers, pop-psychological guides – all those kinds of books that had been unwelcome in communist Poland. As one translator of Swedish, who unsuccessfully tried to persuade publishers to publish translations of Swedish literature, put it, “Polish publishers firmly believe that God speaks English”. Even today, translations from English account for around 60% of all translations of foreign literature published in Poland, and according to various estimates translated books account for 26–40% of the book market. In that strange chaotic period at the beginning of the transition there was such a demand for translators from English that many people with various language skills tried their hand at the profession. Some have proven themselves as literary translators, others have not. I tried it, and I succeeded. My first translations from English

**“Reading crime stories [...] I discovered a lively modern language that we were not taught at school”**

had some connection with my specialisation – a friend of the editor who was looking for a translator for *Not Without My Daughter* by Betty Mahmoody remembered that she knew someone who had graduated in Oriental studies. (Iran – Iraq – apparently that didn’t make much of a difference?). Together with my late friend Grażyna Gasparska we translated the book under a pseudonym. The second one, about oppressed Saudi princesses, which was also a co-translation with Gasparska, I do not even want to mention. I am not proud of those translations, being aware that I have contributed to the consolidation of the orientalist stereotypes that I so wanted to fight against. Fortunately, no publisher asked me again to translate books of this kind (and if they did, I would refuse). Having no background in formal English studies, especially in English literature, I did not dare to translate English fiction. In my work with Arabic I focused on language, style, cultural background, etc. In working with English, which I consider a kind of contemporary Latin, the subject matter is important. I was (and still am) lucky to translate books on themes that interested me. I found fulfilment



**First page of Teach yourself Arabic**  
**Photo: Hanna Jankowska**



in translating non-fiction literature, essays, biographies, travelogues. After several years of dealing only with Middle Eastern issues it seemed to me that new worlds were opening up to me. I cannot but be proud of acquainting Polish readers with the books of such distinguished authors as Benjamin Barber, Richard Sennett, Naomi Klein, Alberto Manguel, Michael Walzer, Tony Judt and others (perhaps it was a kind of compensation for my unfinished PhD thesis in political science).

### A sense of mission

Until the mid-1990s it seemed that Arabic literature would disappear irretrievably from the Polish market. But this did not happen. Poland turned out to be the only East and Central European country where more books translated from Arabic were published after the transition than before it. For example, in the early 2000s the Smak Słowa publishing house published several translations of modern Arab prose. Nevertheless, translations from Arabic represent only about 0.09% of all translated books in Poland.

I remember that in my youthful naivety I had a sense of mission: I hoped that by translating Arabic literature I would break entrenched stereotypes of the Arab world. Now I am aware that in the reality of the present book market original ambitious literature can hardly compete with sex-and-violence thrash books on oppressed Muslim women and bad terrorists. But its presence is important, and it is available for those who care.

The majority of the few Polish literary translators from Arabic have been and are academic scholars. To put it



**The Polish translation of *H is for Hawk***  
Photo: Hanna Jankowska

bluntly: if someone wants to do this work, they must have another source of income, because they can't earn a living from translation. English has enabled me to become a freelancer and a full-time literary translator. It gave me the freedom so that I, in the mid-1990s, was able to leave my job at an Arab embassy in Warsaw where, due to the dwindling political and cultural relations, my work had become rather pointless and unsatisfactory.

### Missing the Russian melody

As for Russian, that's another story. I have always had a sentiment for this language, for its melody, for Russian poetry, classic novels and songs. At the beginning of the 1990s, access to



*Hanna Jankowska is a literary and audiovisual translator of Arabic, English and Russian into Polish and has translated about 90 books, mainly non-fiction, and dozens of documentary films. In 1997 she received the award of the Polish Translators' Association for the translation of The Clash of Civilizations by Samuel P. Huntington. Jankowska has a MA in Arabic studies from the University of Warsaw and is an active member of the Polish Literary Translators' Association (STL).*

*Hanna Jankowska. The text on her T-shirt is one of the slogans of STL: "Love translators!"  
Photo: Iwonna Natkańska*

Russian culture was practically cut off, which was quite a natural reaction to forced love for the Soviet Union. I missed it – not the USSR but the culture, of course. I borrowed Russian books from a rental shop in one of the booths of Jarmark Europa, the giant bazaar in Warsaw Stadium. Reading crime stories by Marinina and Dontsova, I discovered a lively modern language that we were not taught at school. After several years Russian films returned to some new TV channels and my refreshed Russian turned out to be of use when I was asked to translate feature films and TV series. Have I completely moved away from Arabic literature? It's hard to tell. I do not follow its recent developments as carefully as my colleagues in the Academia do but I keep up with its publications in the Polish book market. From time to time I translate poetry.

Publishers remember me when they look for translators of books by Arab authors who write in English (Anthony Shadid, Hisham Matar). My old fascinations have faded, but still there is one book I would love to translate. It is Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography *A Mountainous Journey* that enchanted me many years ago. Maybe someday I will have a chance to present it to Polish readers ...

# Mad about graphs

## *CEATL examines Europe's literary translators' working conditions*

*Claudia Steinitz &  
Miquel Cabal-Guarro*

“I’m mad about graphs and statistics” Miquel states, to which Claudia adds “I put my whole life into Excel files”. And a good thing too, because these are well-needed qualifications for entering the CEATL working group on working conditions. Of the six working groups CEATL currently has, it was the first to be created, in 2005, with the aim of collecting facts on the general and financial situation of literary translators all over Europe. In 2008 it published a first **ground-breaking report** on the catastrophic income situation of literary translators in 23 European countries and regions. In 2012, the group carried out a survey on the visibility of literary translators as authors of their translations. It included questions about naming the translators in the translated books as well as in reviews on radio and TV or in newspapers.

The most recent survey on income in all CEATL member countries took place in May and June 2020. For the first

time, one survey was formulated for all translators in Europe – association members or not, full-time or part-time translators, experienced colleagues and newcomers – in 25 languages. In order to get the broadest response possible, CEATL representatives in all member associations had to convince their members and other translators in their countries using good arguments. It’s always difficult to get people to talk about money...

### **Working conditions after Covid-19**

Out of 3700 responses, there were almost 2000 complete answers. Currently, the Working Conditions WG is sorting, coding and translating collected data in order to begin to evaluate the results. The answers on general questions, e.g. about age and experience, show that all categories mentioned above are represented in the dataset. Here are some graphs summarising the general questions:

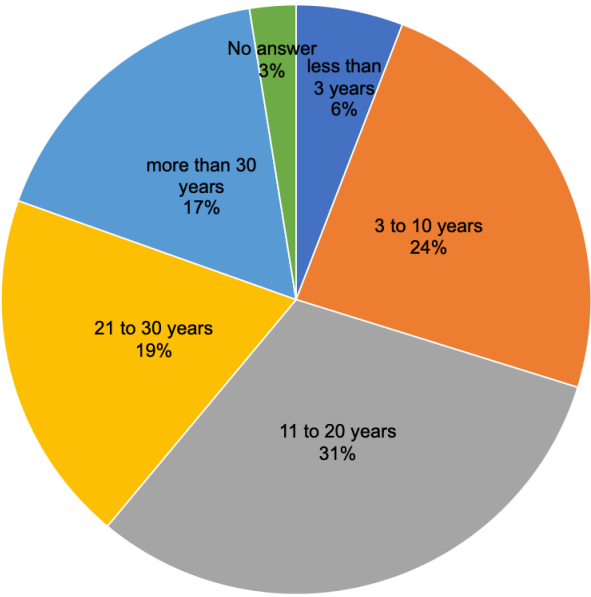


Figure 1: Years of working experience

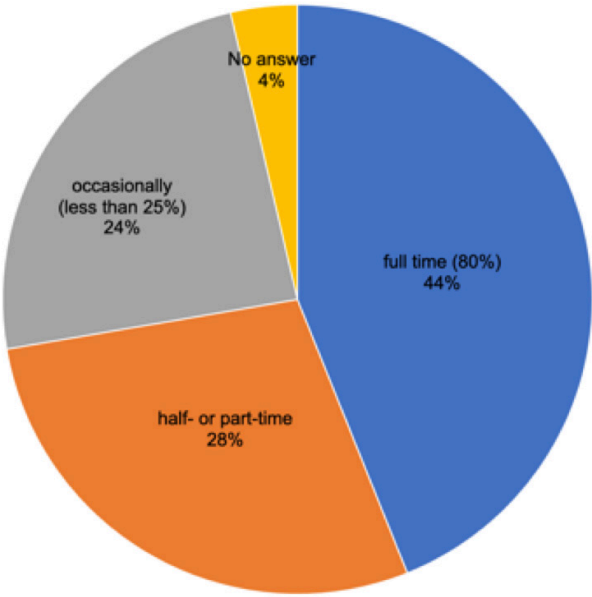


Figure 2: Full or part-time work as literary translator

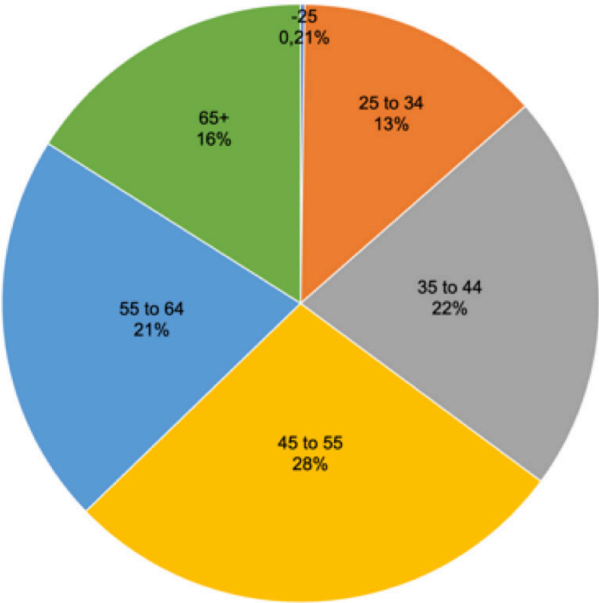


Figure 3: Age of respondents

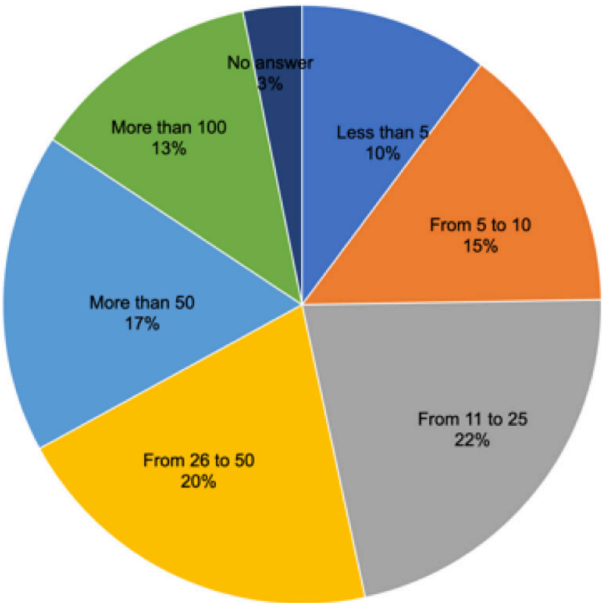


Figure 4: Number of translations published



As it was (and still is) quite a special year, last-minute questions about the initial consequences of the COVID-19 crisis in Europe were included. Questions asked were: if the crisis affected translators in their work, if they had a lower workload, if deadlines of existing contracts were re-negotiated, and also if they were able to concentrate and work under the stressful circumstances as well as they did before.

## *“Last-minute questions about the initial consequences of the COVID-19 crisis were included”*

The answers show that in May and June about 30-40 per cent of the respondents experienced delayed payments, postponed contracts or contracts put on hold, re-negotiated deadlines, and loss of expected income from literature-related public events.

The responses about translation fees, royalties, subsidies and prices, which form the greater part of the data, will be evaluated and summarised by the end of 2020, when it is hoped the final report will be published.

### **How the data will help translators**

The results of the surveys on working conditions are used for different purposes: Firstly, CEATL needs this data for lobbying the EU institutions for better working conditions, more grants and subsidies for literary translators and publishers, as well as for more authors' rights, public lending rights and cultural recognition and visibility. Secondly, we want to make data available to national funding organisations which promote their national literature and therefore fund translations into other languages by translators in other countries. This data could be very useful to the “[European network for translation](#)” (ENLIT). Finally, every member association of CEATL can use the data for their own policies and lobbying and for comparing their situation with other countries.

Nowadays, speed becomes ever more important. That's why we are thinking about new ways of collecting data via shorter and quicker surveys and reporting the results on CEATL's website, our national translators' associations' websites as well as on Facebook, Twitter and in this e-zine.



**Miquel Cabal-Guarro** is a literary translator from Russian to Catalan. He has a PhD in Linguistics and currently teaches Translation, Linguistics and Russian Literature at Barcelona University (UB), Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). He is a board member of the Catalan Writers' Association ([AELC](#)) and is their delegate in CEATL. He is one of the two vicepresidents of CEATL.

**Miquel Cabal-Guarro**  
**Photo: Elvira Jiménez**



**Claudia Steinitz** has been translating literature from French to German for 30 years. She was one of the founders of [Weltlesebühne e.V.](#), an association which brings translators onto the world stage and promotes their public recognition. She was awarded the Jane-Scatcherd-Prize for translation in 2020. Claudia lives in Berlin and is the CEATL delegate of the German association [VdÜ](#).

**Claudia Steinitz**  
**Photo: Guido Notermans**

SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# Literary machine translation:

*Are the computers coming for our jobs?*

*James Hadley*

In the wake of the second world war, experiments in machine translation began. In 1947, American mathematician Warren Weaver laid out in a memorandum his vision for how digital computers might be used to translate human language. Earlier in the decade, a series of computers, including the Bombes and Colossus had been used by the Allies at Bletchley Park to decode Nazi messages. By comparing translation to decoding, it was not a great leap of imagination to conceive of machines being used to render messages from one language to another.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, research devoted to creating machine translation systems, primarily of the English–Russian language pair, was seen as a national security priority on both sides of the Iron Curtain. One of the most notable events of this decade was the 1954 Georgetown–IBM experiment, in which the automatic translation of more than sixty Russian sentences into English was carried out by a rules-based system. This experiment was seen as such a success at the time that it was confidently claimed that the problem

of machine translation would be fully solved within three to five years.

## Multiple exceptions to language rules

Rules-based systems, comprising bilingual dictionaries, along with logical rules for how to handle the textual information were based on the traditional language teaching methods. However, as anyone who has learnt a second language knows, language rules tend to come with multiple exceptions, meaning that these systems quickly became unwieldy, slow, and plagued with errors. In 1966, the Automatic Language Processing Advisory Committee concluded that despite significant investment, machine translation systems were not likely to reach the same standards as human translators in the near future, and that efforts should be moved towards developing tools to assist translators, what later came to be known as CAT tools, such as Trados.

Thus, for over a decade, machine translation research in the US slowed to a crawl. However, it continued in other countries, with the focus falling on a very small number of languages,

such as English and French, as in the case of the METEO system used in Canada from 1977–2001 to translate weather forecasts between the country's two official languages. Around the same time, rules-based systems were being replaced by statistical machine translation (SMT) systems, which did not rely on manually coded rules, but on large corpora of parallel sentences which a computer uses to produce new translations. These systems originally worked word-by-word, and later came to work phrase-by-phrase. Thus, they work relatively well for high-resource, relatively similar languages pairs, where the huge number of parallel sentences required to build the corpora are available. However, in the case of languages with substantial differences in word order, or a limited availability of parallel data, they tend to fair less well.

### Statistics versus neurons

By 2014, these were being superseded by systems using neural machine translation (NMT). These also rely on large corpora of parallel sentences in the two languages under consideration. However, neural systems are modelled on the way that neurons communicate in the human brain, where many small processes are brought together to create the final product. So, they depart from statistical systems in that statistical systems use their corpora as the ingredients for their translations, whereas neural systems use their corpora effectively to learn how to translate for themselves. These newer systems tend to produce translations more quickly and to a much higher quality – to the extent that if they are given enough training

data, they can produce translations that are indistinguishable from texts produced by human translators.

So, is it game over for the human translators? Well, no.

**“Authorial styles are not necessarily transferable”**

While neural systems are extremely effective at translating certain types of texts, especially those of a formulaic nature with short sentences, they are still very restricted in terms of what they can do well. This is because of technicalities that underlie the systems. In order to train a system, a large corpus of parallel sentences is required, and the system will perform better when it is trained on the kinds of sentence that it will be asked to translate. For example, a system trained on parallel sentences all taken from car manuals will likely perform very well at translating car manuals, and less well at translating cookery books. Getting past this issue is not as simple as just training a system on every kind of text, because the machine has no way of distinguishing which kinds of text it is trained on and dealing with in any given instance. Therefore, training a system on a wide range of text types will likely mean that the outputs for any of them will not be as strong as if the system were trained specifically on any one of them.



### Millions of parallel sentences

This problem is not particularly grave when it comes to most technical texts, because the writing conventions that govern cookery books are not a million miles away from the conventions governing car manuals. So, while a system trained on all sorts of technical texts may not, statistically speaking, perform as well as a system trained on only one, the difference is often not so great as to cause serious issues. The same cannot be said for literature, however. In literature, not only are the writing conventions substantially different from many technical texts, these conventions differ substantially between authors, time periods, genres, and forms of literature.



*'The Long Room' in the old library,  
Trinity College Dublin  
Photo: Sarah Shaffe, Unsplash*

Even though they are both kinds of poem, a sonnet is very different from a limerick. Even though they both fall into the fantasy genre of novels, *Harry Potter* is very different from *The Lord of the Rings*. The problem for machine translation systems is that for much literature, authorial styles are not necessarily transferable, and there is no precedent on which to build a system. Whereas there may be many parallel examples of contracts, for example, in the two languages with which a system can be trained, how is it possible to say what is the parallel of Dante in Swahili, or Tolstoy in Vietnamese? The nearest thing we could come up with would be a human translation of Dante into Swahili, or Tolstoy into Vietnamese. But a training corpus needs millions of parallel sentences to work effectively, which might work out as hundreds of books – many more than any one author is likely to have produced during their career. And practically speaking, if human translations for all these texts already exist, what is the point of training a system to translate the same texts in the same way again?

### A corpus won't help with text style

It may be tempting to think that authorial style is not the end of the world. Surely, the “meaning” is what counts first? Well, that is not really the case when it comes to either literature or machine translation, where form and function are bound together. This was recently brought home to me in an experiment where we experimented with translating some poems from the *Arabian Nights* with a system which had been trained using the only parallel corpus available for Arabic-English, which is comprised mainly of Quranic translations

and data from the UN. Although the vast majority of the words in the poems appeared in the training data, the style of the texts was so different from what the system was trained on that in most cases, it simply drew a blank.

A related point is that machine translation systems today work on the sentence-level, meaning that they translate one sentence in isolation, and then forget about it as soon as they move onto the next. Again, this is generally not a big issue when dealing with technical texts. But for literature, where ideas, metaphors, allusions and images can be recalled sentences, paragraphs, or even chapters later, the machines have a long way to go before they will be able to approach the skills of a human literary translator.

### Software as the literary translator's assistant

For these and many other reasons, machine translation programmers are generally extremely tentative about what they expect from their systems and by when. Thus, what we are currently seeing is developers working on tools specifically to help literary translators. While some literary translators already make use of CAT tools, such as Memo-Q, many have not found these as relevant to them as to technical translators. But machines do have the ability to help with issues specifically relevant to literature.

For example, the [QuantiQual Project](#) is researching indirect literary translations produced by humans and machines. Indirect translations are translations of translations. For example, if a translation cannot be made directly from

language A to language C, a mediating or “bridging” translation in language B might be used. While sentiments about whether this practice should take place at all have historically overwhelmed the fact that it has and does take place very widely, this project is interested in how the practice can be useful in helping us spreading knowledge and literature to languages that have historically been overlooked. One of the things the QuantiQual project is doing just now is to work out how the strengths of machine translation, in drawing on a very wide range of information sources; categorising technicalities; and identifying patterns, can be used to support human translators. The team is finding ways to help a translator who is faced with something like the poems in the *Arabian Nights*, and needing to render them into another language.

**“Any serious challenge to human literary translators is still a long way off”**

They are building a system which will not create translated poetry itself, but will give the human translator key details about the source text at a glance, which will allow them to work as efficiently as possible. For example, the software can tell the translator which of the



*James Hadley is Ussher Assistant Professor in Literary Translation at Trinity College Dublin, and the Director of the College's award-winning MPhil in Literary Translation master's degree. He is also the principle investigator on the [QuantiQual Project](#), generously funded by the Irish Research Council's COALESCE scheme.*

*James Hadley  
Photo: Private Archive*

rhyming patterns found in this type of poetry each text corresponds to, show where the rhymes, alliterations, and assonances are, tell the translator what the word counts, and average sentence lengths are, and give thesaurus-like glossaries in the target language for each of the words found in the poems. This way, the human translator is still the one choosing the most appropriate options and producing the translations, but the software is assisting them by allowing them to focus their attention on producing text, rather than on searching, and collecting supporting information from multiple sources. Compared to this highly complex text type, adapting a similar system to work with texts such as novels to assist translators in maintaining certain elements of style, such as sentence length, pronoun usage, or idiosyncratic word usages is a relatively small step.

So, while “never say never” is probably a good maxim, it is worth bearing in mind that pessimistic translators have been foretelling the arrival of their mechanical replacements since 1954. In translation studies and machine translation alike over the past seventy years, the more we have found out about translation, the more we have seen that it is much more complicated than we ever could have assumed. Any serious challenge to human literary translators is still a long way off, but we are already starting to see tools being developed that will assist literary translators in their work.



SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# Duel with DeepL

## *Literary translator Hans-Christian Oeser on machine translation and the translator's voice*

### What experience have you had with MT tools?

I have been working as professional literary translator from English to German for the past forty years, slowly advancing from mechanical to electric to electronic typewriters and from a non-IBM-compatible Amstrad to a variety of PCs and laptops. In a sense, my work practice has mirrored the onward march of technological progress over the decades, albeit in a rather halting and hesitant fashion, owing to my innate conservatism. So computer-assisted translation tools were far beyond my horizon ...

With the advent of the internet, my wide range of well-thumbed physical dictionaries has gradually been superseded by electronic dictionaries, although I had been quite dextrous at finding the right lemmata at a fingertip even in large volumes such as the *Große Muret-Sanders* (an arduously acquired skill!). Obviously, online dictionaries have the huge advantage of regularly being brought up to date, whereas printed lexica are hopelessly antiquated soon after publication.

When I did try out translation applications such as Babel Fish or Google Translate, I found them quite useful in day-to-day contexts but utterly lacking in quality and reliability when it came to literary texts. When approached by two computer linguists who wished to carry out empirical research into the benefits or otherwise of machine translation tools for literary translation, I agreed rather apprehensively to participate in two experiments, the first serving as a pilot study for a broader in-depth investigation.

In autumn 2018, I was asked to revisit F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*, a novel I had translated into German as early as 1998. In spring 2019, I was handed an excerpt of about six pages, which I was to have processed by a machine translation program and to post-edit. The purpose of the exercise was to compare the ensuing result with my purely "human" translation of 1998 in terms of style and vocabulary and to examine "how the translator's voice is affected in workflows involving machine translation". It was



found that my “textual voice” was somewhat diminished in my post-edited work compared to its stronger manifestation in my earlier machine-independent German version.

In my comments on those findings, I argued that the diminution detected by qualitative corpus analysis might also, if not more, have to do with a general impoverishment of my vocabulary which seems to have occurred over time in spite of the amassed wealth of experience as a literary translator. In other words, there was not only the opposition “man v. machine” to consider, but also that of “then v. now”.<sup>1</sup>

### Which tools did you use?

My suggestion to the researchers was to use DeepL Translator, the free commercial machine translation service launched in 2017, which I judged to be more accurate than Google Translate or Bing Microsoft Translator, if by no means adequate for literary purposes. As the translation in question as well as the more comprehensive follow-up was or is to be a once-off experiment and I do not necessarily wish to proceed wholesale with machine translation, I did not purchase DeepL Pro.

I was then asked to engage in a quasi-supervised translation research project on a much larger scale, the funding of which has not yet been approved. A German publishing company based in Hamburg had commissioned me to translate Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* (published in autumn 2019).

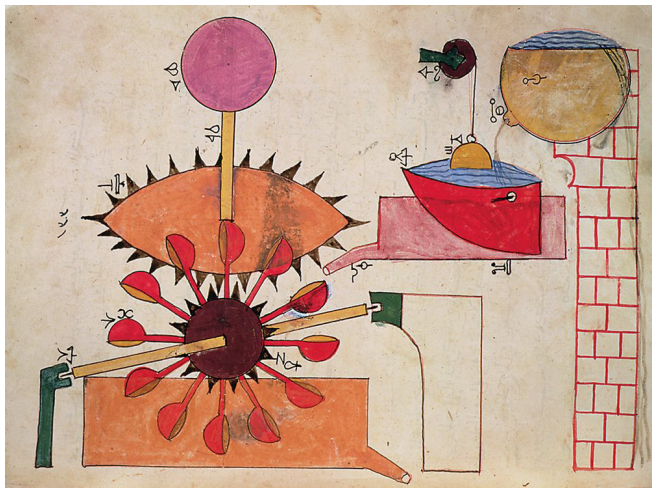
This work of 333 pages was deemed suitable for a full-length comparison of original text, machine-generated translation and post-edited version.

And thus it was that, in spring 2019, I fed the DeepL Translator window with small portions of the original (the limit for any one feed is c. 5000 characters) – a process that took, believe it or not, less than seven hours, meaning that an English-language novel of considerable length could be presented to the prospective German reader in less than one working day. But would it be a faithful and creative rendering of Christopher Isherwood in German? Would there be a recognisable translator’s voice at all?

In addition to those aesthetic questions, I fear certain repercussions not so much for not using the tool but, indeed, for using it. To my non-expert mind, there might very well be legal and contractual implications. Whose work is the finished product? The machine’s (or its producers’ and providers’), the human translator’s or both? Who can, in the end, claim copyright? Could DeepL Translator rightfully maintain that, in spite of my post-editing efforts (which would place me in a position similar to that of a publisher’s editor and copy editor), I had appropriated “their” translation? Could the publishers contend that not I myself but rather a translation program was the originator of the German version and that therefore I should receive less pay?

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<sup>1</sup>The findings were published in Dorothy Kenny & Marion Winters, “Machine Translation, Ethics and the Literary Translator’s Voice”, in: *Translation Spaces*, vol. 9, issue 1 (August 2020), pp. 123–149. See also the Click List in this issue of *Counterpoint*.



**Al-Jazari piston rod and water wheel**  
**Photo: Werner Forman Archive**

### Were you trained in how to use this tool?

No training was needed. It was a cakewalk.

### And your overall views?

I must confess that whenever colleagues working in the domains of commercial, technical, legal or medical translation mentioned computer-aided translation tools such as Trados (and that happened in the eighties!), I had to plead ignorance or expressed doubts and suspicions, being unable to abstract from my own field of literary translation with its particular and peculiar challenges of individual style, including rhythm, sound, musicality etc.

As for DeepL Translator, I would summarise my admittedly limited experience as follows. There are advantages and disadvantages in employing machine translation for works of literature. Psychologically speaking, it is comforting to have an entire novel at the ready within a few hours. It feels (and, of course, that feeling is a huge fallacy!) as though the work to be carried out might already

have been accomplished – a welcome boost to your self-esteem. Also, in terms of the time spent on post-editing, as opposed to translating from scratch, it could be argued that the overall effort is somewhat less time-consuming. On the downside, the translation, as proffered by the machine, bears no resemblance whatever to a readable – and enjoyable – human translation, deficient as the latter may be. The machine has, as of yet, no proper sense of context, of wordplay, ambiguity, polysemy and metaphor or of rhetorical devices such as alliteration and assonance. It frequently mistranslates, using inappropriate words and phrases, seemingly chosen at random from its vast lexicon. Two examples (from another attempt at machine translation) may suffice: “*Ungeöffnete Buchstaben liegen auf einem Stapel*” for “Unopened letters are in a pile”, where ‘letters’ is translated in the meaning of ‘sound symbol’, not of ‘writing’. Or: “*Das Bild wird gehalten, wenn Anita bei einer Landung innehält*” for “The image is held when Anita pauses on a landing”, where ‘landing’ is translated as the touchdown of an aeroplane rather than as part of a staircase. These errors are easy-peasy and can be rectified without difficulty. But on a syntactical level, sentence structures often remain very “English” if they are not outright ungrammatical. Occasionally, it can be disheartening to have to disentangle the machine’s gobbledygook.

Worse still, the machine has no awareness of elegance, of beauty, of stylistic coherence (or indeed intended breach of style) and is unable to create an unmistakable “sound”, combining the original author’s personal voice with that

of the translator. Its output is altogether uninspired and uninspiring. “Post-editing”, in fact, entails painstaking retranslation. Hence, in the case of Christopher Isherwood’s novel there was hardly a sentence that did not have to be thoroughly revised and rebuilt.

There is another trap. When you revise a pre-existing translation, and the machine translation is a pre-existing translation and not a rough draft of your own making, you are faced with a dilemma not encountered when embarking on a fresh translation that is not machine-produced. It is a dilemma known to every editor proper: how to respect both the original author’s and the translator’s voice? You do not have to “respect” the machine’s “efforts” but you have to set to work against two backdrops at once: the original and the pre-existing translation, each posing its own difficulties.

**“Post-editing”,  
in fact, entails  
painstaking  
retranslation”**

Psychologically and mentally, more often than not your creative energy is channelled along predefined paths which you might not even have known to exist and which might not at all correspond to your own writing style as it has developed over time. This might result in a constraint if not a loss of linguistic and literary competence in terms of

word selection and sentence formation. Whereas, if confronted with the original alone, you are compelled to find innovative solutions of your own to each and every challenge. Your professional experience, your educational habitus, your instinctive feeling for language, your aesthetic intuition, the spontaneous inspiration of the moment will suggest words, phrases and sentence constructions utterly different from those suggested and indeed pre-empted by the machine. Your translational activity might be aided on one level but on another it is hampered and impeded.

**Was your translation fee any different than if you hadn’t used an MT tool?**

As no one was aware of my doings, I was paid my usual fee. However, there are justified fears among literary translators that in future publishing houses might commission book translations stipulating the use of machine translation tools in order to reduce fees and to downgrade the literary translator, who only recently has been able to secure some degree of social standing, to the role of out-of-house editor.

**How do you see the future of literary translation in relation to both CAT and MT tools?**

Technological progress, including the development of artificial intelligence and its offshoots, seems unstoppable, irrespective of ethical and practical considerations. There is no doubt that sooner rather than later neural machine translation tools will be further refined, incorporating ever greater quantities of text corpora and ever more subtle logarithms doing greater justice to complex grammatical features.



**Hans-Christian Oeser**  
**Photo: Barbara Schaper-Oeser**

*Hans-Christian Oeser studied German and Politics in Marburg and Berlin. In 1980 he moved to Ireland to take up a post as Lecturer in German at UCD. Since then he has been working as a literary translator of works by, amongst others, Jamie O'Neill, Patrick McCabe, Sebastian Barry and Christopher Isherwood, as an editor and travel writer. Oeser received several awards for his translations, including the 2010 Rowohlt Prize for his life's work. His [website](#) offers an overview of his work.*

My savvy computer linguists seem to think that the advantages of both machine translation and human translation could be combined by “personalising” the tools on offer. By means of computer-aided text analysis all previous works of *one* literary translator could be assembled as a comprehensive text corpus which would form the basis for future text generation to be used and polished by the selfsame translator.

For now, I would propose that every literary translator ought to have the possibility and the right to utilise every tool at their disposal, that is to say: not only analogue and digital dictionaries, not only translation memory and terminology management software but also online or offline translation programs of every description. On the other hand, no literary translator must be coerced into doing so or made to merely redact machine translations, with the corresponding loss of income and status.

I, for my part, shall continue to avail of electronic tools but, being conscious of the dangers arising to my artistic autonomy, only to spot-check and not over a wide area of text. As an organised community, however, we must strive to resist and reject any attempt by publishers (some of whom are already rumoured to contemplate steps in that direction) to transform, as part of a cost-minimising exercise, from machine-aided human translation to human-aided machine translation that which is rightly *our* work. We will have to be the Luddites of the humanities! For as long as publishers regard literary translation not primarily as a commercial commodity but as a product of the human intellect, the human imagination and the human spirit, for as long as they are interested in high literary quality, we may harbour some hope.



SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# CAT tools – the literary translator's new assistant?

*Katja Zakrajšek shares her experiences of working with MT*

## What CAT tools have you used for literary translation?

I've used both MemoQ and Trados, mostly the latter. I think they are comparable in terms of functionality for a literary translator. While I also have some experience with OmegaT, I would not use it for literary translation; I find the interface is not suited to that. What you need – at least, what I need – is having the original and the translation side-by-side.

## What kind of texts did you use CAT tools for?

Creative fiction and nonfiction. For verse – especially rhymed verse – I feel the need to go freeform on the page.

## Was it your choice or did a publisher/employer ask you to use a CAT tool?

It's entirely my choice. If anything, publishers tend to be surprised – and sometimes even unable to

supply the original in a format that would allow me to use a CAT tool. I may get paper, or scanned copies – whatever was obtained from the agent. It's all rather 20th century!

## Were you offered any training and did using the tools have any influence on your fees?

I've had some training for MemoQ, which is very transferable to Trados, but that was on my own initiative. And I've had a lot of peer-to-peer help, mostly from non-literary translators, who are more likely to use CAT tools. My fees have remained the same.

## How do CAT tools affect the quality of your translations and the amount and nature of the work?

I don't think a publisher would necessarily notice a difference in the end result, but the CAT tools certainly make a difference in the process of



*Katja Zakrajšek translates from English, French and Portuguese into Slovenian, moving between the humanities and literary fiction, where she is particularly interested in writing by African and African-diasporic authors. Currently working on *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo.*

**Katja Zakrajšek**  
**Photo: Gordana Grlič**

getting there. It's just easier to produce a consistent translation. Sometimes I use glossaries, which are really meant for terminology but work just as well if a literary text has words or phrases that crop up repeatedly. (Or for names, so I don't have to misspell and then correct them a hundred times.) Translation memories help with repetitions and variations as well. Furthermore, a CAT tool makes it easier not to miss bits of text. And for rereading and checking the translation? It's glorious. Finally, I find it's a more ergonomic way of going about translation – a somewhat unexpected but invaluable advantage for me. (Book below screen, book beside screen, two screens: I'd tried them all, with no luck. There's a lot to be said for not being in pain because of your work.) On the other hand, I have lost work to mysterious technical issues with the tool. It's not perfect.

### **How common, in your view, is the use of machine translation tools in your field?**

In literary translation, it's not common at all. It's not unheard of – I tried it at the recommendation of another literary translator – but so far, we're a small minority. It may be more common among people who move between literary and non-literary translation.

### **How do you see the future of literary translation in the light of CAT tools?**

However helpful CAT tools are, I don't see them revolutionising literary translation even if – or when – they become more widespread. The main tool is still the literary translator's brain, aided and abetted by their peer network and the book's editorial team.

SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# Less room for engagement

Researcher *Waltraud Kolb* on literature and machine translation

## Could you describe the main focus of your research?

My research on machine translation is part of a larger ongoing research project regarding decision-making in literary translation. Why do we translate the way we do? Why and how is one word chosen over another, one style over another? How do decisions, processes, and routines involved in translating a literary work differ from the cognitive processes that go into post-editing a machine translation of a literary text? How does this impact the final target text?

## What methods you use?

Traditionally, we look at published translations, prefaces or interviews by translators to study translation; but that kind of analysis comes “after the fact”, as George Steiner once famously said. Through my research, I aim to gain insight into the translation process as it happens, the translator’s (and post-editor’s) thinking, but also their actions when they work on auto-pilot. I asked five literary translators to translate an Ernest Hemingway short story from scratch and five different translators

to post-edit a machine-translated version (DeepL). To capture these processes for later analysis, they used keylogging software that unobtrusively registered keystrokes, pauses, edits, etc. At the same time, they talked aloud while working, voicing their thoughts and reflections, and this was audio-recorded. I have an enormous amount of data, keylogs and verbal records, and am currently analyzing it.

**“High-quality post-editing is not much faster”**

## What gave you the idea for the topic of this research project?

Translators and publishers have started using machine translation, even if, more often than not, it is probably still in an experimental stage. Computer linguists and the machine translation community have also begun to pay attention to literary translation from



**Waltraud Kolb** is Assistant Professor of Literary Translation at the University of Vienna. She studied translation (English, French, Portuguese/German) and holds a PhD in comparative literature. One focus of her research is literary translation processes and machine translation. She has been working as a freelance translator since 1985 and is a member of the executive board of the **Austrian Association of Literary Translators**.

**Waltraud Kolb**

**Photo: Private Archive**

their own unique perspective, while it is still largely unexplored from a literary translation studies perspective.

### **Can you tell us something about your preliminary results?**

One result, not surprising, is that high-quality post-editing is not much faster: even though Hemingway's story is simple and straightforward, the post-editors changed 90% of the sentences – the main problems the machine had were cohesion, reference, idioms, polysemy. Another preliminary finding is that the two groups seem to distribute their efforts differently. While the translators spent ample time on repetitions and ambiguity, stylistic features typical of Hemingway, the post-editors did so to a much lesser extent. This indicates that engagement with the source text/author differs between the two modes. With post-editing, there is an additional layer to deal with, much of the cognitive effort going into deciding what to do about the machine version, and this seems to leave less room for engagement with the source text/author.

### **How do you see the future of literary translation in relation to machine translation tools?**

I expect to observe a shift away from translation to post-editing work in the medium term, with the key factor being time: will it be faster to translate a book or post-edit a machine version? This will be more relevant for some sectors of the book market than for others, but generally I anticipate increasing pressure from publishers to cut costs this way, even though post-editing may be as cognitively demanding and time-consuming as translation. And I am sure this will have all kinds of implications for copyright issues. The other issue at stake is quality, and the main risk I see is that post-editing will often not be done by translators. Is there also a long-term risk that, with the increasing use of machine translation, (literary) language will eventually become more uniform? Possibly.



SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# The future relationship of literary translation and AI

## *Reflections from CEATL president*

*Morten Visby*

While it is certainly an interesting question how AI-based machine translation would fare in dealing with densely written, highly complex literature, particularly when translating between languages and cultures that are very far apart linguistically or historically, the more pressing concern for literary translators living and working today and tomorrow is the commercial viability of AI-based machine translation of contemporary genre literature, not least when the languages are closely related – e.g. the Nordic languages or the Romance languages. I am referring to the translation of crime, suspense and romance between linguistic domains that are closely related in time and culture. At this moment we need to look at the actual, real-life implications of AI-assisted machine translation for us as literary translators. And regarding that issue, I do have a couple of notes. Some of them are rather pessimistic. Others less so.

### **Getting real on people vs. machines**

I believe that we underestimate the powers of AI at our own peril. Although

we might not like it, the fact is that machine translation of genre literature is actually quite good – meaning that it is not always obvious whether a human being or a machine have translated the text. And in this regard, it is important not to take free Google Translate services as an indication of the level of quality for AI translation. Also, due to the logic of ever-increasing processing power AI translation can only be expected to become even better. And we know from unpleasant experiences in other quarters of our professional field that publishers are, if not more than happy, then at least sometimes willing to accept less good, but workable solutions to translation. Particularly if these solutions hold promise of a cheaper and more streamlined production of translated literature, to the detriment of what would otherwise be considered fair, decent and sustainable in the long term.

So, let's get real on this topic. This is not the time to feel safe in the belief that the human brain will always, in the end, be superior to stupid machines. The issue of AI in literary translation

poses a whole range of challenges other than the logic of the human-machine interchangeability would suggest. But before that conversation becomes relevant, we need to look at a few other, more crude issues.

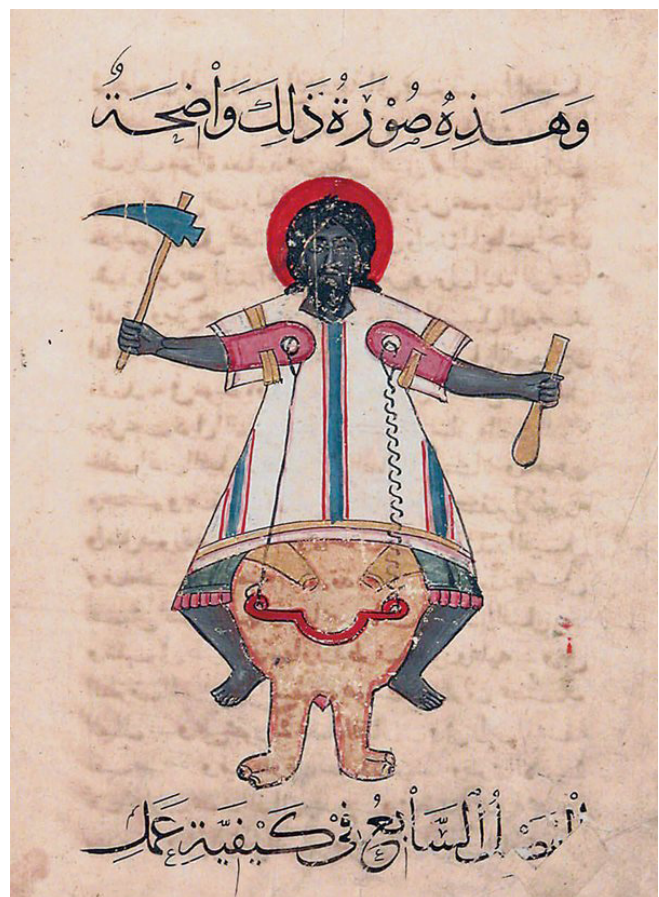
***“This is not the time to feel safe in the belief that the human brain will always be superior to stupid machines”***

Contemporary genre literature can be acceptably translated by machines. I am sorry, but it can. It is perfectly feasible that publishers would want to use machine translation of such works. It is faster and cheaper. The quality is good enough for the market, and a human editor would be needed anyway, because human translators also make mistakes. I have talked to publishers who admit that they would like to go down this route, and that they only elect not to, because they fear the damage it would do to their brand. That should tell us something about the very real danger of AI for us as professionals, but also something about the strong public perception of our cultural value as literary creators.

Recently (but before the COVID crisis), an independent consulting firm working

with AI, carried out an unpublished survey among European publishers, asking them if they would consider using machine translation if it could deliver acceptable quality. More than half of the publishers said that they would absolutely refuse to use machine translation no matter how appealing it was from a financial perspective, simply because they consider themselves part of a people industry and part of a cultural sector in which personal, human expression carries the utmost value and must be protected.

I believe this self-understanding among European publishers is very strong



**Al-Jazari elephant clock driver**

**Photo: Metropolitan Museum**

and can be relied upon to slow down the implementation of AI-assisted translation considerably. But it would

be naïve to expect all publishers to feel this way. Likewise, it would be naïve to think that this sentiment could eventually stop the implementation of AI-assisted translation.

***“Literary translators may find themselves in an even more precarious position than their current one”***

#### **Who owns the translation?**

Another very important issue when it comes to AI and literary translation is, of course, the question of authors' rights. Whatever translation software can do, it is in various ways derived from a vast number of existing human translations. The value created by way of such software is based on the copyright protected work of our colleagues. Using copyright protected work – without paying for it – to develop machine translation that eventually will make human translators superfluous, doesn't exactly seem fair. And of course, when literary translators go from being authors of translated works of literature to freelance editors of AI-assisted translations, they may easily

find themselves in an even more precarious position than their current one: both without the labour market protection of employed workers and without the legal protection of their creative work as works of literature.

On a more positive note, there may also be benefits of AI for us as translators. More and more commissioning editors have only English as their second language, and we know that this helps create a very narrow outlook on which world literature is considered for translation. Improved AI-tools for translation might possibly be used by such editors to at least have a look at interesting books written in languages they do not speak themselves. These books, then, would not be translated by machines, but machines would make it possible to assess the commercial viability of buying the rights, finding the right kind of translator and maybe even begin advance marketing. All this could perhaps help diversify the publication of translated literature.



**Morten Visby** is a literary translator from English, Norwegian and German into Danish and former president of the **Danish Translators' Association**. He has worked in the political field of authors' rights and copyright for several years and is the current President of the **Danish Authors' Society** and President of the Board of CEATL.

**Morten Visby**  
**Photo: Ildikó Lőrinszky**

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The Committee on Culture and Education in the European Parliament addressed the problem of AI and literary translation in their 2020 **Opinion** on “intellectual property rights for the development of artificial intelligence technologies”. Among other things, they urge the Committee on Legal Affairs to note, when drawing up their motion for resolution on the issue, “that the question of the extent to which a work created by AI can be traced back to a human creator is of key importance”.

This evokes the fundamental question whether AI translation without any input of a human creator is possible at all. The importance of this question is affirmed by the committee when it “draws attention to the need to assess whether there is such a thing as an ‘original creation’ that does not require any human intervention.”



## OUT & ABOUT

# From Romania to Belgium:

## *Seven questions to Doina Ioanid and Jan H. Mysjkin*

### **Where did you stay and for how long? What made you choose that particular location?**

We spent the first half of July 2020 at the [Vertalershuis / Translators' House](#) in Antwerp. We tend to choose our location according to the specific project we are working on: the Vertalershuis in Amsterdam for Dutch authors, the European College of Literary Translators in Seneffe for French-speaking Belgian authors and the International College of Literary Translators in Arles for French-speaking authors. We also come to Antwerp when we are translating a Flemish author.

### **What have you been working on? Can you tell us something about the text and the writer?**

On this occasion we were working on Willem Elsschot, a classic Flemish writer. According to a survey by the De Standaard newspaper, he is the most translated Flemish author in the world, but there isn't a single book by him in Romanian. For our first title we chose *Kaas* (*Cheese*), the novel that the author himself considered to be his finest work. The text is simple and

dense, yet not at all long. It's both tongue-in-cheek and touching at the same time, which appeals to people. We believe that the novel will be very well received by Romanian readers.

### **What is the most challenging aspect of translating this text into Romanian?**

In terms of composition, Elsschot plays around a great deal with verb tenses, which change abruptly, sometimes from one paragraph to the next. At times these changes correspond to an inner voice, a dialogue which the character has with himself, at others to a scene in which one feels like a spectator. We had to carefully follow this shift from one verb tense to another and make sure that it would occur naturally in Romanian. Fortunately, Romanian is more flexible in this respect than French, for example.

### **You have already done literary translations together. How did this collaboration work?**

One of us produces the first draft, and sends it to the other by e-mail, with variations and questions. This is followed by translation sessions over the phone, which can easily last as long as two

hours. Finally, we try to meet together at the same table in one of the colleges or translators' houses, surrounded by a battery of dictionaries. Once we have reread the text aloud and resolved any difficulties, the translation is ready.

**You have translated a great deal of poetry together. Is your method of translating a prose text different? If so, in what way?**

No, we have stuck with this effective method of working in tandem for both poetry and prose. Each text, whether poetry or prose, demands that we capture its specific voice, that we sense its atmosphere. As we work in tandem, we speak about this voice, we refine it, we adjust it. Most of the time, we are on the same wavelength, but occasionally, we may argue passionately over a single detail.

**How has your translation project benefitted from this residency?**

First of all, due to the possibility of physically sitting at the same translation table. Also, the president of the Willem Elsschot Genootschap / Association of Friends provided us with translations of Kaas into German, English, French and Italian, which we consulted from time to time to see how other translators had dealt with a specific problem. Usually, when we are in Antwerp, we spend several afternoons a week in the excellent Hendrik Conscience Flemish Heritage Library carrying out research on our author. We were unable to do so this time, as there was simply not enough time for proof-reading *and* research.

**How does the situation of literary translators in Romania differ from that of your colleagues in Belgium?**



**Exterior of Translators' House Antwerp**  
**Photo: Bob van Mol**

First of all, from a down-to-earth perspective, they are badly paid. We had problems demanding a rate of 5 euros per 2,000-character page. And there are many publishers paying lower rates, which is simply insulting. All too often the translator is considered to be a negligible quantity. There are publishers who don't even mention the translator's name in their catalogues, let alone on the cover. However, the name of a good translator is a guarantee for the quality and sales of the book. The translators' association, which is affiliated to the Writers' Union of Romania, is rather slow and/or ineffective. In Romania, there is no translator's house, and this is unlikely to change any time soon. Nevertheless, translators, who are living on the poverty line, do a good job, keeping their dignity. It's pathetic, but it's the truth.

*Translated from the French  
original by Penelope Eades*



**Jan H. Mysjkin (left) and Doina Ioanid at work in Translators' House Antwerp**  
**Photo: Karen Thys**

**Jan H. Mysjkin** was born in Brussels in 1955. Since 1991, the year in which he received the National Prize for Literary Translation in Belgium, he has led a semi-nomadic life between Amsterdam, Bucharest and Paris. He has written about ten collections of poetry, some in Dutch and others in French. He has translated poetry and prose, ranging from the classics to avant-garde authors. His translation work has garnered him awards in the Netherlands, Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

**Doina Ioanid** was born in 1968 in Bucharest. She started out as a French teacher and since 2005 she has worked as a cultural journalist with the *Observator Cultural*. Her personal work consists exclusively of prose poems, which explore female individuality, translated into a dozen languages. Translator of Marguerite Duras and Georges Rodenbach, among others, she has been working with Jan H. Mysjkin since 2012, translating from Dutch into Romanian and from Romanian into French.

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The Translators' House in Antwerp (Belgium), part of **Flanders Literature**, is situated on the second floor of 'Oostkasteel', a big apartment building in the city centre. The apartment can host two translators at a time. Accredited literary translators who don't live in Flanders and have a contract with a publishing house for the translation of a literary work from Dutch, can apply for a residency from 2 weeks to 2 months.

For more information on the conditions and application procedure, please click [here](#).



## NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: SWEDEN

# A long and sometimes bumpy road

## *Swedish literary translators from 1893 to the present day*

**Lena Jonsson**

Since 1893, literary translators in Sweden have been organised in union-like associations together with literary and scientific writers. The first organisation of this kind, the Swedish Association of Authors, was open to all writers and took a very active stance on copyright issues on behalf of its members. Among other things, the association played an important part in the work leading up to the [Berne Convention](#) for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, completed in 1896. The first collective contract for writers was written in 1925, and Public Lending Rights were established in the 1930s. However, in the same decade, the association's bylaws were changed so that translators were more or less excluded, and it wasn't until 1954 that the first association exclusively for translators was founded. Nowadays, we are a part of the Swedish Writers' Union under the name [Översättarsektionen](#), "The Translators' Section".

### **Our aims and connections**

The aim of the Section is to strengthen translators as a group, both in society in general and in the publishing industry.

This includes providing assistance to translators with regards to negotiation and interpretation of contracts, both individually and collectively, taking measures to enhance the visibility of translators, and lobbying government agencies and politicians concerning e.g. copyright law, legislation on taxation and social security. The Section also arranges seminars and social activities for translators on a regular basis. For many of these activities, we receive financial and staff support from the Union.

Furthermore, the Section works to strengthen translators as a group within the Union, where we are a minority: approximately 1 in 5 is a literary translator. The success varies, depending to a large degree on the current leadership of the Union. But over the last ten years we have managed to secure the hiring of one officer who works solely with translators' issues, albeit part-time. However, we do in general get good support from the Union's office.

Swedish translators were present when CEATL was founded in 1993, and the



Section has been a member ever since, sending delegates to every Annual General Meeting. In 2008, we took an active part in arranging **WALTIC**, the Writers' and Literary Translators' International Congress, in Stockholm, a very successful conference for writers, translators and scholars from all over the world, and that same week the CEATL AGM was held in Stockholm. Through the Union we are also represented on the European Writers' Council, and through the Norne network we work to maintain links between the Nordic countries. Nationally, we are represented in many forums dedicated to translation and translators' issues, including the **Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators** in Visby, Gotland.

### Boycotting works!

One of the Section's main concerns during the past five years has been negotiating the renewal of our Standard or Model Contract. For a very long time,

the Union and the Swedish Publishers' Association had an agreed Standard Contract and both parties loyally stood by it. But in 2017, the agreement was unilaterally terminated by the publishers during renewal negotiations. Sweden's largest publishing house, Bonnier, presented a new model. Their suggested contract included a great deal of changes for the worse for translators – the new model for remuneration would in effect result in lower fees, the Publisher would be granted the "Last Word" on the wording of the translation, and the Publisher would acquire all rights to the translation for a period of 30 years. And so on.

Renowned translators who were offered commissions on these terms refused to agree to these provisions. The Union and the Section recommended that their members didn't sign Bonnier model contracts. The **boycott** made headlines in daily newspapers, TV



Translation from left to right: 'Who has written this beautiful text?' 'Me!' 'Me!' Cartoon by Sven Nordqvist



**Lena Jonsson**, literary translator and legal bureaucrat (why choose?). She mainly translates YA fiction, most notably *The Hunger Games* trilogy and several novels by Ursula K. Le Guin. She has been on the Board of the Section and a delegate to CEATL since 2016.

**Lena Jonsson**  
**Photo: Private Archive**

and radio, was much quoted on social media, and also received support from colleagues abroad. And it worked! With the aid of the Union officers our selected committee managed subsequently to negotiate a much-improved contract and the boycott was lifted.

Currently the most important issues for the Section are:

- We are re-negotiating the Bonnier contract for translation commissions that has been in effect for two years. Together with a couple of other publishers we are trying to negotiate a contract model suitable and acceptable to both parties.
- We are looking into the practices of two or three smaller publishers to decide whether or not to dissuade our members from taking commissions from them. The terms in their contracts are simply far below all reasonable standards.
- In cooperation with our colleagues in the translators' organisations **SKTL** and **KAOS** in Finland, we were planning for the CEATL AGM in Åland in 2021.
- Finally, we are considering how to plan members' activities in COVID-times, including everything

from public prize ceremonies and seminars to monthly pub meets.

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### **The Swedish Writers' Union**

The Union has approx. 3000 members and of those, approx. 600 are literary translators. The association works to safeguard the economic and moral interests of all members by defending freedom of expression and of the press, and by keeping up to date with copyright stipulations and laws regulating copyright.

All members may consult the office for individual help with interpretation and negotiation of contracts, and with agreements and disputes over such, as well as get tax counselling and other legal assistance. These services are free of charge. In principally important cases, e.g. concerning freedom of expression, the Union may absorb litigation costs for members. And finally, the association assists members in collective bargaining measures.

## ME AND MY DICTIONARY

# Variants – a lucky break for languages

*Jacqueline Csuss*

Austria is a German-speaking country ... as are Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Southern Tyrol and parts of Belgium. We all speak German, at least so it seems. Our common language is “Hochdeutsch” or standard German and the Duden is our sanctimonious reference. A frequent and admittedly tedious question German speakers (from countries other than Germany) are confronted with is whether, for instance in Austria or Switzerland, we speak German.

So yes, we all speak German; and yet Karl Kraus, the Viennese turn-of-the-century writer and journalist, famously said: “What separates Germans from Austrians is the common language.” Oscar Wilde, by the way, said something similar about the English language: “We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language.” The same would be true for Flemish and Dutch, Portuguese in Portugal vs. Brazil, Spanish in Spain vs. Latin America.

Standard German is taught in schools, it is the standard written and spoken version in official settings, it is what we speak when we don’t speak dialect. To claim, however, that there is one standard version would be misleading because there isn’t, not even in Germany. It doesn’t mean we don’t understand each other; it’s just that many words also have a regional variant which often differs only slightly from “Hochdeutsch” and is in most cases self-explanatory. Variants are also often related to the historical past; in the case of Austria, they can be of French origin which entered the standard language in Imperial times, whereas Viennese dialect is full of Czech, Yiddish, Hungarian and Italian words and expressions going back to a time when the city was a melting pot of migrants from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire. To a certain extent they too entered the Austrian standard German. So, when I speak Viennese dialect I’m literally a linguistic mongrel with a huge wealth of phrases or words at my disposal I obviously

can't use in my translations but nonetheless sometimes refer to when I want to give the text a certain sound.

### Who determines the standard?

As a German speaker born and raised in Vienna and later as a translator, I always considered my written German as standard as can be – by way of my education and my studies in German literature and philology. Yet, in my early experience with German publishing houses and editors, I saw words changed and removed, sentence structures altered and colloquialisms thrown out for no apparent reason – at least not from my point of view.

## “When I speak Viennese dialect I’m literally a linguistic mongrel”

They would refer to these words as “Austriacisms”, a regional vernacular, so they’d claim, not always familiar to the “German-German reader” (and thus the biggest market). Yet, they were words I thought perfectly “German” and as such no problem for any average reader which in fact they weren’t, not to mention that I often considered them more apt and better sounding than the “standard” alternative suggested by the editor. The point I’m getting at: I had to

compromise and make “standard” part of my thinking but I also learned that instead of having my “German” as it were changed I’d either use something less controversial or argue my case which in time I had the confidence to do.

Austriacisms are basically regional variants of “standard German”. They have nothing to do with dialect – German dialects are so manifold and so different from each other that they can indeed be unintelligible – but instead are variants of one and the same language and thus standard. Just like Swiss variants. Or German ones come to that. The difference is not in the language, it’s more a question of who determines standard and why. In this context it’s perhaps worth noting that Christine Nöstlinger, the late Austrian writer of children’s best sellers, refused any editorial changes of the Austriacisms in her books. The only compromise she was willing to agree to was a glossary at the end of her books — mind you, not for the children who loved her stories either way but for the parents reading to them.

### Treasure trove of ideas

My dictionary is called *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen — die Standardsprache in Österreich, der Schweiz und Deutschland sowie in Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Ostbelgien und Südtirol* (Dictionary of National and Regional German Variants — The Standard language in Austria, Switzerland and Germany as well as in Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the German-speaking community of Belgium and South Tyrol in Italy) first published by De Gruyter in 2004), a collection of standard German words and phrases noting their national





*Jacqueline Csuss, translator from English to German, member of the board of the Austrian Translators' Association (IG Ü).*

*A wealth of variants  
Photo: Jacqueline Csuss*

and regional particularities. Every entry is referred to its region and provided with a quote from published texts. Equivalents are not called “standard” but “common language” German. It is basically an attempt to point out the diversity of one language without any kind of hierarchy. The particularities are treated on an equal level and not distinguished as deviating from a cross-national standard language. For me, as a translator, it’s a treasure trove of ideas – and from a linguistic point of view it is an inspiration and fun to read.

Examples for the English language would be the *MacQuarie Dictionary for Australian English* and in particular the famous Hobson-Jobson of 1886, a glossary of Anglo-Indian words and phrases. Another one I find very enjoyable both as a read and an important reference source is *The Joys of Yiddish* by Leo Rosten, a kind of cross-reference for English and German, given that it’s all one family.

Personally I believe it’s precisely a language’s variants which make it truly diverse and ultimately richer. Moreover, with a growing number of non-native writers around the world, most languages nowadays benefit from neologisms, hybrid words and added expressions and not least from a set of new slangs. Instead of “standardising”, we should see these developments as a lucky break, an opportunity to reflect similar evolvments in other languages and to embrace them in our translations. Another argument by the way why the human translation will always be light years ahead of the algorithm!

# CEATL's Click List

## *Links to the world of translation*

### Machine translation, ethics and the literary translator's voice

Hans-Christian Oeser collaborated with Dorothy Kenny, Dublin City University, and Marian Winters, Heriot-Watt University, on their research project entitled 'Machine Translation, Ethics and the Literary Translator's Voice'. The set-up and results of the study were published in [Translation Spaces](#), a biannual, peer-reviewed, indexed journal that recognizes the global impact of translation. It envisions translation as multi-dimensional phenomena productively studied within complex spaces of encounter between knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices.

An abstract of the article on the study by Kenny and Winters can be read [here](#).

Both Dorothy Kenny and Joss Moorkens, editors of Translation Spaces, work with the [Centre for Translation and Textual Studies](#), Dublin City University.

### Words Without Borders

The online magazine [Words Without Borders](#) is a monthly English language publication on international literature founded in 2003. The magazine's aim is to expand 'cultural understanding through the translation, publication, and promotion of the finest contemporary international literature'. Apart from the monthly thematic publication – in October, for instance the theme was 'Writing on Climate and the Environment' – WWB also has a blog, [WWB Daily](#), featuring articles on literature, book reviews, news and literary fiction and nonfiction texts in translation. Furthermore, WWB has a '[Translator Relay](#)' where every couple of months a translator is interviewed according to six questions. Afterwards the translator chooses the next interviewee. WWB also gives out prizes and hosts events on international literature, and in 2016 they won the [London Book Fair Literary Translation Initiative Award](#). Lots of good stuff on literature and translation to be found!





*Three arrested translators and members of the Belarus PEN centre*

*Photo: PEN International*

### **Three translators from Belarus arrested: CEATL joins declaration of solidarity**

In the crackdown on voices of independent civil society currently going on in Belarus fundamental human rights as the freedom of expression and the freedom of opinion **are being violated** by the regime under President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

In September 2020 three translators and members of the Belarus PEN centre, Hanna Komar, Uladzimir Liankievic and Siarzh Miadzvedzeu, were arrested and administratively imprisoned for participating in peaceful demonstrations in Minsk, though these are legal according to the present constitution of Belarus.

CEATL **condemns** the unlawful arrests of our colleagues, and several delegates, including the CEATL president, have participated in the digital solidarity manifestation **#freewordsbelarus** for our fellow translators and writers in Belarus.

On the initiative of the **Swedish Writers' Union**, and in a cooperative effort between CEATL and the **European Writers' Council**, representatives of 120,000 authors from 22 countries has taken part in a reading the poem "The Border" by Barys Piatrovič, the Chair of the **Belarusian Writers' Union**. The poem was translated into English by a translator who, for safety reasons, prefers to stay anonymous.



## Digital exhibition of Polish translators

On the event of International Translation Day, the **Polish Literary Translators' Association** together with **EUNIC Warszawa**, the European Commission and the City Culture Institute prepared a multimedia online exhibition entitled 'Portraits of Translation'.

The **exhibition** comprises of 35 'portraits' of Polish translators, translating from more than twenty European languages. Each portrait consists of the presentation of one book in Polish translation, including the book cover and a short introduction, a video and an audio recording in which the translator presents the book, excerpts from the book in both the original language and translation, and the translator's bio and picture.

## Translators' lives and impact through the ages

'We use translated works all the time. But how about the translators themselves, and their influence on shaping languages and cultures?' Marie Lebert, a linguist, librarian and researcher whose areas of interest include multilingualism, translation, translators and the way digital technology has changed our lives across borders and languages, tries to answer this question in her recent overview *A history of translation and translators from antiquity to the 20th century*. The history can be read [here](#).

## French online panel on literary machine translation

Last November, as part of its 37th annual conference (**les Assises de la traduction littéraire**) which took place this year not in Arles but online, the French association for the promotion of literary translation Atlas, devoted a panel to machine translation.

In conversation with Jörn Cambreleng, director of Atlas, Laurence Danlos, professor emeritus from the University of Paris and researcher in automatic language processing, Dominique Nédellec, literary translator from Portuguese, and Bruno Poncharal, researcher in contrastive linguistics, translation and translation science at the University of Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle, [gave their] exchanged views on the developments in machine translation of literary texts, and the future role of literary translators. You can watch the video [here](#).

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# Colophon

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**Editorial team:**

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

**Coordination of French issue:**

**Valérie Le Plouhinec**

**Proofreading English:**

**Penelope Eades-Alvarez**

**Proofreading French:**

**Valérie Le Plouhinec**

**Design:**

**Róisín Ryan**  
[roryan.com](http://roryan.com)

**Webmaster:**

**David Kiš**

**Distribution:**

**Valérie Le Plouhinec**

Suggestions and comments can be sent by email to [editors@ceatl.eu](mailto:editors@ceatl.eu)

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