

# “Diversity only exists as long as there is translation”

*Expert group formulates recommendations for European cultural policy*

*Hanneke van der Heijden*

Last year *Counterpoint* talked to Valeria Pulignano, professor of Sociology at Leuven University. As the head of a team of researchers on the precarious status of translators and other self-employed professionals, she noted that the economic position of translators is becoming increasingly unsustainable. Pointing to the big difficulties this is causing for both translators themselves and for society at large, she concluded that the system needs to **change**.

Pulignano is not the only one worried about the organisation of the European translation sector. Calls for a more vibrant translation sector can be heard at EU-level as well, though the rationale is different. For the EU, the starting point is the circulation of European cultural works – not only books but also films, plays and music. The more these works circulate, the better for European integration. Since Europe is a continent with many different languages,

translation is essential for the circulation of European works, and thus for “social inclusion and European integration”. Thanks to translation, non-native speakers have access to literary works from other countries. Translation is, in EU words, ‘key to enabling broader access to European content’.

Based on these considerations the EU Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022 provided for the creation of an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Group of Member States’ experts focussing on Multilingualism and Translation. In February 2020 the Council of the European Union (representing EU member states) set up an OMC group of experts from EU member states. Icelandic, Norwegian and Swiss experts also joined. The group, chaired by the French expert and coordinated by the European commission, was mandated with the task of preparing a report with an

analysis of best practices as well as recommendations on the role of public policies and funding schemes. The research question is how policy and funding, whether it be national or European, can help the circulation of translated books, and can help the development of a translation sector that is vibrant enough to cover all cultural sectors.

In March 2021, nearly a year after the OMC group was set up, *Counterpoint* had a Zoom meeting with its coordinator, EU policy officer Arnaud Pasquali, to talk about the background of the OMC Group and its inner workings.

### **Publishing and selling**

“During the Covid crisis it has become clear that there continues to be an appetite for literature. People have more time and they read more. But bookshops haven’t been able to fully benefit from this. Publishers on the other hand, worried by the limited possibilities for book launches and other promotional activities, decided to postpone the publication of new books. Fewer titles come out, and the diversity on bookshelves is diminishing. Factors such as the size of the book sector in a certain country and the original language of a book play a role too. Books in so-called lesser used languages, Portuguese or the Baltic languages for example, are more vulnerable in this respect than titles written in one of the ‘big languages’,” Pasquali says.

As is the case in many sectors of society, the Covid crisis has also put the spotlight on the flaws in the book sector that have been endemic in the system for a longer period of time.

Pasquali notes “It’s often said that Europe is strong because of its diversity. But this diversity will no longer be accessible if the translations published are mainly from ‘big languages’ like English. Diversity only exists as long as there is translation.”

The OMC Group co-ordinator distinguishes between two different attitudes among publishers. “Some say ‘We sell the books we publish’, whereas others hold the view ‘We publish the books we sell’.” While acknowledging that companies need to operate on a sound commercial basis, Pasquali stresses that publishers must be encouraged to also take risks. One of the tasks of the OMC Group is to find out how the EU can best support the book sector in this respect.

### **Navigating between translation sectors**

Supporting publishers is, however, only one part of this effort. In order to enhance the circulation of books, including books with lesser chances of becoming a commercial success, it is necessary to address the entire book value chain – from the author of the original work to making a title available to readers abroad which, especially in the case of lesser used languages, must include organisations such as literary agencies, funding bodies (both national and European), publishers, book fairs and organisations for the promotion of books and reading.

And it is here that translators come in: the mandate of the OMC Group emphasises the essential role of translators, and the wide array of professional tasks they carry out. Apart from translating texts, translators often

act as ambassadors and promoters, both to publishers who might be interested in publishing a text, as well as to a larger audience, once a text has been translated. The role of the translator in promotional activities is especially important in the case of texts written in lesser used languages, i.e. those which are less easily accessible to international publishers.

In order to be able to carry out such a diverse range of tasks translators have to be equipped with a set of different skills. Linguistic and cultural competencies are the obvious ones. The ability to interact with different agents in the cultural market stems from the translators' key role in the circulation of cultural work but it also involves an understanding of the technological requirements in different sectors of translation and of a rapidly changing market.

Pasquali tells *Counterpoint* that “most translators are self-employed and it is often impossible for them to find enough work in one single sector of the translation market. In order to make a living, literary translators are increasingly forced to navigate between different sectors, such as book translation, dubbing, subtitling, interpreting, teaching etc. Translators therefore need to be up-to-date with technological developments, they need professional contacts in different sectors, and they need to be visible. At the same time, translators' work is at risk in all of these sectors, as artificial intelligence and other developments make translations faster and cheaper.”

Continuous training for translators is therefore another important topic for the OMC Group, as is the professionalisation of the translation sector, upholding fair pay and adequate contracts

covering the rights of copyright holders despite the threats technological developments and economic challenges constitute to a translator's income.

In this respect Pasquali mentions the EU Digital Single Market Directive which was passed in 2019: “The Copyright Directive is now being implemented by EU member states at national level. It provides a new legal framework for the contractual relationship between the translator and his or her employer, which is a welcome change in some countries.” A central feature of this directive, at least for translators, is that publishers will be obligated to provide full transparency on the sales and revenues of the individual book to the individual copyright holder.

### Not reinventing the wheel

Who then are the members of the OMC Group? Pasquali says “Approximately 30% of the members of the OMC Group are literary translators themselves. As practitioners, they have professional experience in the field, expertise and a network of contacts. Representatives of national councils for the promotion of books and similar public organisations make up another 30%. Slightly more than 30% of the members are representatives of the Ministries of Culture in their respective countries. They mostly work at an operational level such as financial support or policy, and are keen to learn from colleagues in other countries.”

While the composition of the OMC Group itself is a great source of know-how, the group also invites external individuals and organisations with specific expertise or experience to the meetings. “Organisations such as CEATL are consulted on issues concerning literary translators in Europe, and AVTE in relation to subtitling and



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**The European Commission**  
**Photo: Romaine. Own work CCO**

dubbing. Similarly, we interview publishers and other stakeholders such as representatives from book fairs, book sellers and experts from the educational sector. We are, in short, talking to the entire sector. The OMC Group shouldn’t reinvent the wheel,” Pasquali says.

Divided into subgroups working on themes such as continuous training, status, professionalisation and the book market, OMC members compare and collect different national policies, analyse results, discuss examples of best practice and how they can be applied to improve the support system. For instance, is the Creative Europe grant system provided to publishers an adequate instrument for the promotion of a more diverse literary production? Is it compatible with financial support given at national level? How can other kinds of support systems, such as networking possibilities for translators, be organised? What are the requirements for the training of literary translators? How do we ease the access to and dissemination of fair contracts on translation and proper

remuneration, which is a key to making the translation sector more sustainable? Hopefully, the joint effort of the group will be able to provide resources and answers to some of these questions.

The conclusions of the OMC Group will take the form of concrete recommendations for all stakeholders in the book value chain at national and EU level. Considering the sometimes very different practices between EU-countries, Pasquali is keen to avoid one-size fits-all recommendations. The final report is expected to be ready in Autumn 2021.

### **EU funding for the creative sector**

The Creative Europe programme under the European Commission has just launched calls for the 2021–2027 programme. Cultural organisations can apply for funding of cross-European cooperation projects, promotion of capacity-building etc. Application deadlines are 26 August and 7 September. Read about it [here](#).