A new online platform for literary translators

Interview with Babelkat editor Gesine Schröder

In January this year, the new online platform Babelwerk, based in Germany, saw the light of day at a launch party at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. Counterpoint *talked to one of the platform editors, Gesine Schröder, who is responsible for the database Babelkat.*

What is the main idea behind the platform Babelwerk and how did you go about it in practical terms?
The very first idea that led to what is now Babelwerk came from Marie Luise Knott at the German Translators' Fund (*Deutscher Übersetzerfonds*): She suggested creating a platform containing "literary translators' knowledge". Late in 2020, a brainstorming session with various experts was called to give this idea some shape: What kind of knowledge did we want to present, to whom, and in which formats? The platform would need different sections to cover the production, presentation and documentation of knowledge for various audiences. Johanna Steiner was tasked with project coordination and took me on board as a freelance contributor to draft and develop the bibliography database, Babelkat. The German Translators' Fund acquires, edits and curates the content and provides the organisational framework for the project.

Today, an editorial team consisting of Johanna Steiner, Martin Neusiedl and myself, supported by an advisory board, edits the three main sections of Babelwerk: the magazine *Konterbande*, in which we publish essays, articles and international news items; a collection of online resources for literary translators in the *Handwerk* section; and the bibliography database *Babelkat*.

For its development over a year and its first year online, Babelwerk has been funded through the pandemic grant programme *Neustart Kultur* ('cultural relaunch'), issued by the Minister of State for Culture and Media.

Who do you want to use Babelwerk and what do you hope to give them?
True to the original idea, Babelwerk has become a platform that compiles and presents existing knowledge resources for literary translators as well as publishing new contributions to our knowledge pool.

For the professional audience, we are hoping that Babelkat will prove to be a useful research tool that accumulates, interlinks and combines knowledge resources and presents them all in one spot. Additionally, Babelkat offers users the possibility of organising and annotating their (private) personal research library, thereby keeping their knowledge easily acessible for future projects. Plus, they can build a visible profile by presenting their area of expertise in public resource collections (called 'Sammlungen' in Babelkat) and by adding their own publications to the bibliography.

For the broader public, the magazine *Konterbande* provides high quality contributions to the public dialogue on cultural topics from the unique point of view that translators have, drawing on the vast knowledge base that we all acquire during our professional lives.

Babelwerk is based in Germany and has a German language starting point. What are your thoughts on the issue of language when it comes to reaching an international audience?
Babelkat contains documents in many languages, and these will be added to by the user community over time. We are still very much in the early stages of the project, but structurally, it is laid out to serve different language communities.

Once all the planned features are implemented, we can translate the user interface and start building a more international user base. The magazine *Konterbande* might start publishing in languages other than German if the overall concept proves successful.
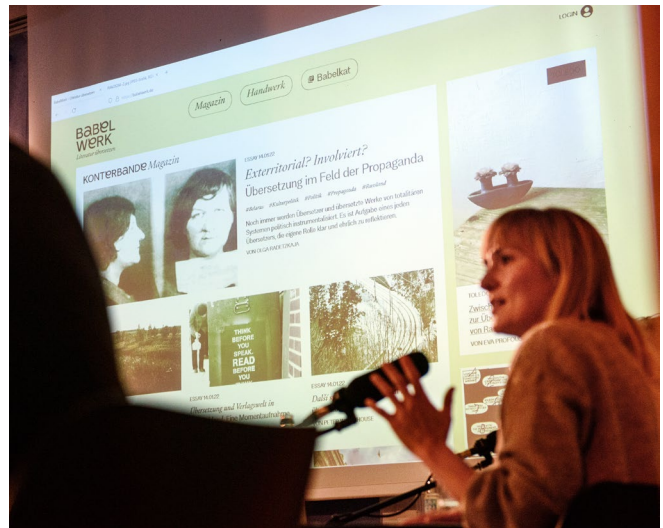
Project coordinator Johanna Steiner at the launch party for **Babelwerk,** *January 2022 Photo: Tobias Bohm*

What do you see as the greatest challenges for literary translators at the moment?
The gig economy, growing automation and rising demands on efficiency and speed are changing the working conditions of technical translators, but starting to affect literary translators as well. Where personal relationships are replaced by gig worker pools or pitches, low production prices are the only means of distinction for us. In order to counter this trend, we are aiming to make the complexity and creativity of our work more visible.

At the same time, literary translators are increasingly contemplating their own role in a complex cultural landscape. In their essays in *Konterbande* magazine,

Gesine Schröder is a literary translator from English to German. Voluntary work for the VdÜ translators' association magazine Übersetzen *prompted her to delve into the field of knowledge organisation and information retrieval. For Babelwerk, she provided a first draft of the bibliography database Babelkat and has been contributing to the development of this part of the website as a freelancer ever since.*

Gesine Schröder
Photo: Frischefotos

Olga Radetzkaja points out the danger of becoming part of a cultural propaganda machine; Larissa Bender reports on the hostility she faced when promoting the literary work of Syrian authors as an editor; and Claudia Hamm reflects on language choices in the

translation of postcolonial literature. An in-depth examination of topics like these will help us take on our cultural role actively and responsibly.

Babelwerk consists of three sections:

1. The magazine *Konterbande* ('Contraband') is aimed at the general interested public. It contains essays on a wide variety of translation-related topics, articles about important keywords and technical terms - compiled in the 'translators' alphabet' — as well as notes and reports on international debates about translation topics, provided by a network of correspondents.

2. The section *Handwerk* ('Craftmanship') is a curated link collection containing important resources for translators, so

it is directed at a more professional audience.

3. The bibliography database *Babelkat* contains metadata on documents for and about translation. Several magazines and blogs (including *Counterpoint/ Contrepoint)* have been contributing bibliographical data to all their articles and posts. Research is facilitated by tags and annotations added to the documents. Registered users can save, organise and export their findings or add new entries to *Babelkat.*