

Translators’ dictionaries in Sweden – and Europe

Lars Kleberg

Since book production started, translations have made up approximately half of all texts available in Swedish. But in the more than 500 years that have passed, historians and literary scholars have paid scant heed to this fact. Translations, and the women and men who through their work have made world culture accessible to the Swedish reader, have remained in the shade. Only recently, has this situation started to change.

An important factor that has thrown new light on Swedish translation history is a database project at Södertörn University (Huddinge, Sweden). Over the last fifteen years a group of researchers and librarians has developed a comprehensive Swedish Translators’ Dictionary called *Svenskt översättarlexikon*. This is an online database of bio-bibliographical articles about Swedish and Finland-Swedish translators from the Middle Ages to the present. It can be best described as work in progress

on a ‘translation history from below’.

The project had two sources of inspiration, one practical and one theoretical. In the years 1997–2012, Södertörn University ran a successful literary translation programme. It was a kind of master class series, where young translators worked on what was usually their first book under the guidance of the best literary translators in Sweden. In the seminar discussions about how translations are read and how the work of translators is traditionally evaluated, we found that translation criticism in Sweden – if it existed at all – traditionally meant only noting errors and making sweeping generalisations. We wondered: where are the positive examples? Where could we find the description of the merits of a good translation, and of the accomplishments of individual translators? A critical bio-bibliographical dictionary of translators, who usually do not appear in existing dictionaries of writers and



*Celebrating the online launch of Svensk översättarlexikon, 12 May 2009. In front librarian Magnus Sandgren, Lars Kleberg and IT specialist Mats Eriksson. Far left, at the back, author Nils Håkanson
Photo: Private Archive*

general encyclopedias, seemed to be the answer to these practical questions.

A comprehensive biography of the translator

Theoretical input for the Södertörn project soon came from the work of the translation studies scholar, Anthony Pym, and his article ‘Humanizing Translation History’ from 2009. Inspired by the discussions with our students at Södertörn and by the example of Pym, we started constructing the new dictionary in collaboration with our university library. The basic idea was simple. The technical requirements for the database were simplicity, clarity and accessibility for both academic users and the general reader. Each entry should consist of a comprehensive biography, a characterisation of the translator’s work and its importance for its time and for today, a full bibliography of all the translator’s published works, including performed but not printed scripts for plays, and a profile of the

person. The purpose of the dictionary was threefold: firstly, cultural policy-wise, to make the work of our colleagues visible; secondly, to try to develop a critical language for describing what a translation is and does; and thirdly, in an academic context, to lay the basis for a Swedish translation history, starting from below with the individual actors.

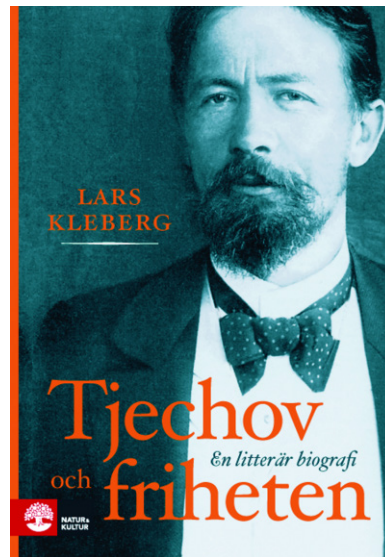
The selection and collection of entries was initially quite spontaneous. In May 2006, the future editors gathered around 20 Swedish scholars, translators, librarians, and book publishers in a colloquium to discuss the possibilities of creating a Dictionary of Swedish Translators. Every participant was asked to send a number of translators’ names that should be considered for future articles. The resulting list was then enlarged with names of persons who had received the more prestigious translators’ prizes in Sweden, and with new names proposed by the authors who were asked to write the first test articles.

Step by step, the list of potential names for full entries was growing. When a more stable, small group of editors was formed, ad hoc criteria for inclusion in the future Dictionary were formulated, basically saying “deceased, qualitatively or quantitatively relevant Swedish and Finnish-Swedish translators of foreign literature in the genres of fiction, children’s literature, essays, and the humanities (including also milestones in physics, mathematics, etc.).”

A second, no less important outcome of the May 2006 colloquium – actually essential for the very realization of the future project – was the technical solution for a digital on-line platform for the Dictionary, presented by Magnus Sandgren and Mats Eriksson, IT-specialists at Södertörn University Library. During the next few years, with small funding from external sponsors and the necessary support of the Library, what was to become *Svenskt översättarlexikon* was tested, revised, tested again, and presented at different seminars for feedback from specialists in the field.

Svenskt översättarlexikon went online in May 2009. Only then could the project start competing for substantial financial support from Swedish research foundations. We managed to receive grants twice from *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond*: about € 92,000 for 2012–2014 and ca. € 285,000 for 2015–2017. In 2012, the Dictionary had published its first 100 entries, all about translators into Swedish from the Middle Ages to the late 1900s, with the preliminary goal being set at 500 entries. In addition to the bio-bibliographical articles, the dictionary also had other features, such as general thematic articles, a search

option for source languages and specific periods, and lists of prizes awarded to translators into Swedish over the last 150 years. The use of the dictionary is free of charge through the national full-text digital library *Litteraturbanken*.



Cover of Kleberg’s biography of Anton Chekhov (Natur & Kultur Publishers)

Today, *Svenskt översättarlexikon* contains around 550 articles – all in Swedish – and more than 40,000 titles of searchable works (original titles and translations). It is used widely by scholars, librarians, students, journalists, book publishers, and the general public; the average number of unique users for one month at present reaching around 12.000. A sign of the impact of our project is that a book by one of the editors, Nils Håkanson, entitled *Dolda gudar: om allt som inte går förlorat i en översättning* (‘Hidden Gods: About Everything That Doesn’t Get lost in Translation’) won the national book award *Augustpriset* for nonfiction works in 2021. This could hardly have happened before our dictionary was established as a well-known source of reference.

Other countries following



SVENSKT ÖVERSÄTTARLEXIKON
ÖVERSÄTTARE TEMA PRISER KRONOLOGI SPRÅK LITTERATURBANKEN

Om Svenskt översättarlexikon

Världens författare kommer till oss via översättningar och genom enskilda översättares arbete. I *Svenskt översättarlexikon* blir översättarna – de som har skapat halva den svenska nationallitteraturen – synliga med biografi, porträtt och verkförteckning. Lexikonet utvidgas kontinuerligt med nya artiklar och är fortfarande under utveckling. I första omgången presenteras avlidna svenska och finlandssvenska översättare.

Den nya databasen har utvecklats på Södertörns högskolebibliotek under medverkan av litteraturvetare, språkhistoriker, översättare och kritiker. Eftersom översättarna är en yrkeskår som av tradition har arbetat i skymundan är artiklarna i *Svenskt översättarlexikon* ofta resultat av omfattande grundforskning.

Sigrid Elmblad, 1860–1926

Genom unika förbindelser i det europeiska musiklivet kom Sigrid Elmblad att fungera som en viktig förmedlare av Richard Wagners musik och tankevärld till Sverige. Hennes översättningar av Wagners libretton användes under

Front page of the Swedish Translators' Dictionary

in Sweden's footsteps

For obvious reasons, *Svenskt översättarlexikon* has mainly been of interest for Swedish-speaking users. However, the idea and the form of the online dictionary has slowly been spreading. Already in 2014, the first in a series of European translators' dictionaries was launched by our Danish colleagues. Their articles are still few, but of a high, essayistic level. In November 2015, a German project based in Germersheim under the guidance of Andreas F. Kelletat started publishing very comprehensive, peer-reviewed articles. Today, the *Germersheim dictionary* comprises around 100 entries but has the long-time goal of 2,000 articles. The fastest growing project its kind today is the Norwegian *Norsk Oversetterleksikon*, launched in June 2017, with (at the time of writing) around 135 published detailed articles with interesting critical evaluations of each translator's work. Not least thanks to the excellent work of the Germersheim

colleagues, other European countries have now been able to study the concept and construct of the originally Swedish project. Partly thanks to collaboration with their counterparts in Norway and the Germany, Petra Broomans of Groningen University and her colleagues in the Netherlands have recently started publishing a quickly growing *Vertalerslexicon voor het Nederlandstalig gebied*. All these projects have adopted the general structure of *Svenskt översättarlexikon*, including a list of prizes, a timeline where one can zoom in on translators active during a specific era, and a complete list of all source languages appearing in the bibliographies.

A very ambitious translators' dictionary is now in preparation at the Institute for Literary Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. Ewa Kołodziejczyk is the head of the project *The Digital Lexicon of Polish Translators* which will collect and publish information about



Lars Kleberg is professor emeritus of Russian at Södertörn University, Sweden, and general editor of Svenskt översättarlexikon. He is also a translator and writer. He has written a biography of Anton Chekhov, Tjechov och friheten, published translations of Chekhov's plays and of poetic texts by Lev Rubinstein, Tiden går. Texter ur Det stora kartoteket and Vidare och vidare, co-translated with Johan Öberg, Kajsa Öberg Lindsten, and Dmitri Plax.

Lars Kleberg
Photo: Eva Lindblad

translators both to and from Polish. The format is strictly factographical, with all information strictly marked up so as to make possible complex searches like ‘from which languages were translations into Polish made in Lviv between the years 1920–1930?’ or ‘which Polish translators were of Jewish origin’. The bibliographies are very detailed and include links to peritextual material (reviews, etc). Unlike the dictionaries following the Swedish model, the entries do not include critical discussions or characterizations of the included translators’ work.

It is interesting that we have seen translators’ dictionaries appear in peripheral rather than central literatures, to use Pascale Casanova’s terminology (in *The Republic of Letters*, 2007) – Germany being the big exception. Impressive works of translation history have recently appeared in England, France, the Netherlands, and Spain (notably not in Russia), but to our knowledge no translators’ dictionaries.

Eventually we might see a wider network

of European translators’ dictionaries develop. As the number of entries in each dictionary grows, earlier unobserved networks, traditions and processes will become part of what Anthony Pym calls a “humanizing” translation history. It will in the future help to answer questions similar to those addressed by Peter France in his ‘Introduction’ to the comprehensive *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (2000):

- What has or has not been translated into a given language from the literatures of the world?
- How has translation shaped a ‘canon’ of world literature for a country’s readers?
- How have a country’s translators seen their task, and in what social context have they worked?
- Under what guise have the greater and lesser works of world literature been transferred into a language?
- What is the nature and quality of the different translations currently available to readers?