

A game of Chinese whispers?

Thoughts on relay translation

Nanna Lund

I have had the mixed pleasure of having to do a relay translation a couple of times in my professional life. The first was Nir Baram's novel *מלוע לצ* (*World Shadow*), written in Hebrew but translated into Danish from the German version, the second Orhan Pamuk's debut novel, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* ['Mr Cevdet and his Sons'], written in Turkish but translated into Danish also from the German version. I have next to no knowledge of either Hebrew or Turkish. Both times the process of translating the works presented me with several extremely frustrating problems, and both times I vowed never to do it again.

Nevertheless, I have just signed a contract to do a relay translation of Orhan Pamuk again: *Veba Geceleri*. This time from the English version, *Nights of Plague*.

Riddled with problems

So what is relay translation anyway? Simply put, it's translating a translation: translating one text into another language by way of a third language-version of said text. Yes, it sounds like a

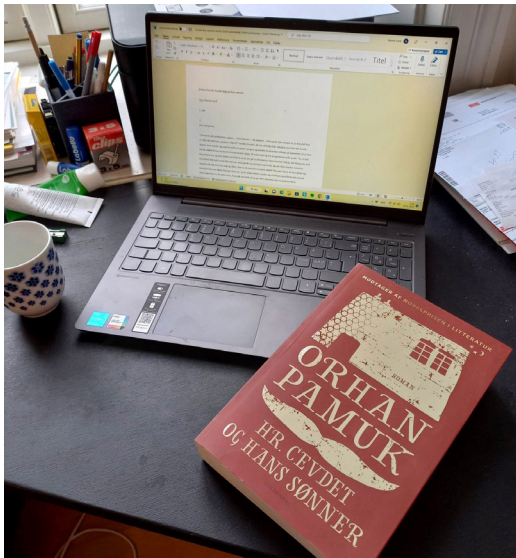
really bad idea, and yes, the process is, as I mentioned, riddled with problems.

If you are a translator of literature, you immediately balk at the idea of not having direct access to the original text. You sit there with a text, originally written in some language you don't understand, trying to get at the style, the phrasing, the melody and meaning of it, all the while knowing full well that you cannot be sure of it. Not entirely. You are reading it through the lens of another language, and who knows what might be lost in translation?

A children's game comes into mind: Chinese whispers. What is said at one end of the line – by the author – might be unrecognizable when it reaches the far end of the line, the relay translator.

Translators of literature are specialists, be it in a certain foreign language, a certain style or genre or period, or a certain author or group of authors. But what mostly defines us is our deep knowledge of the language(s) from which we translate. It is this knowledge

that gives us the unique access to the meaning of the text that in turn allows us to correctly (as correctly as possible, that is) translate that meaning into our mother tongue. Being able to read and understand the author's own mother tongue is a sine qua non when it comes to literary translations – it's what we do, and we couldn't imagine not being able to do it. It would feel so wrong.



Danish translation of 'Mr. Cevdet and his Sons'

Photo: Nanna Lund

Cover: Gyldendal Publishers

Pragmatism in the publishing world

Sometimes, though, our business is a lot less idealistic than you'd like it to be. Relay translations abound. I come from a small country, Denmark. There are only so many literary translators from Hebrew, or Korean, or even Chinese. And sometimes there are none at all, whether it's because they're just not there, or the ones still here are busy doing other things (making a living, for instance), or because there is a hiatus between the one who has now retired and his/her fledgling successor who might not yet be up to

the task of translating this or that (very) foreign language Nobel Prize winner. For literature, this situation is a bit of a nightmare. Relay translations are mired in problems, all too easily imaginable if you are a translator of literary fiction. Every time you encounter something in the text that you are not quite sure of – which you do all the time, even when translating an author in the original language – you ask yourself whether this uncertainty is on the part of the author or the translator that lies between yourself and the original.

Sometimes these uncertainties leave you in a situation so grotesque it's laughable: relay translating Pamuk from the German version I once encountered a place in the text where I was unsure of the gender of the person speaking. I consulted the Swedish and Norwegian versions – and where one version said 'he', the other said 'she'. Luckily, I had a Turkish-Danish friend who could tell me what Pamuk himself had actually written ... This happens all the time. And of course, there is a lot you can do: asking the other translators, reaching out to the author, etc.

I know that most publishing houses in Denmark that publish foreign literary fiction (and we do have quite a few, I'm proud to say, even though the market is small and the chances of making a profit therefore also small, verging on non-existent) all try their best to find translators that can translate the work directly. This is always the first option. Sometimes they can't and have to opt for something else. But sometimes, when they might have been able to find the right person, they still opt for



Nanna Lund translates from English, German, Norwegian and Swedish into Danish, and also works as a freelance editor. She has translated almost 50 works since 2013. Furthermore, she is an active member of the board of the **Danish Translators' Association**, dealing mainly with contractual issues and the financial and legal circumstances of the trade.

Nanna Lund
Photo: Sara Koch

something else. They might not have the professional network. They might not have the time to go look or to train, help, and support a newbie. Or they might not take the trouble for less honourable reasons: Finding the right translator takes time, and time is money, so they just go with someone they know and ask this person to do a relay translation.

So couldn't the author (or the agent) just insist? Well, they know what it's like out there. They just want to be published. In my own case they have been very helpful in pointing out another translation of their work that they trusted.

Often, I suspect, this 'time-is-money' argument plays a rather large part. When I was asked to do the relay translation of Orhan Pamuk's debut novel, the argument I heard was that there simply weren't any Danish translators from Turkish that were up to the task. I later found out this wasn't entirely true and was mortified that I had taken it on and might thus have deprived someone better suited of the job.

The issue of solidarity

This highlights another problem: doing relay translations also puts you in a moral bind. It's hard enough to make a living as a translator of literary fiction even when you translate from English, German, Swedish, and Norwegian, as I do. If you only translate from Turkish it must be almost impossible. As a relay translator you have to consider the issue of solidarity.

When I was recently asked to do another relay translation of Pamuk I tried to take this into account. I made a point of asking the publisher to really search for someone who might actually be able to translate directly from the Turkish version. I had at least three names ready for them from my own professional network. I don't know exactly how hard the publisher tried, but in the end, nothing came of it.

So here I am, about to do another one of those horrible relay translations. I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I promise I won't make a muck of it. But strictly speaking, I'm not the right one for the job.