

On the Visibility of Literary Translators Working from Smaller Languages into English: Some Observations from the United Kingdom

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Abstract: *The present article explores the current situation regarding the visibility of literary translators – and consequently, of literary translation – within the general British context, focusing specifically on those translators working from smaller languages into English. Expanding on the author’s previous research on the topic, the current study employs a desk-based approach to firstly present and outline a translator-focused overview of several British literary translation prizes. These include prominent awards such as the Booker International Prize, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and also the EBRD Literature Prize, which was set up to draw attention to works from various literatures which were previously not so well-known in the United Kingdom. Subsequently, the range of in-country training courses available for literary translators will be highlighted, noting specific aspects relating to the availability and promotion of smaller languages. Lastly, a snapshot of the current situation regarding the wider visibility of literary translators in the broader British context will be provided, including with reference to current moves towards crediting the work’s translator on the front cover of published volumes.*

Keywords: *literary translation; translation prizes; translation profession; literary translator education; literary translators; translator visibility; United Kingdom;*

Introduction

As a key component of the way that literary texts are disseminated and transmitted, the act and practice of translation remains of paramount importance. This was encapsulated succinctly in the observations of the late American theorist Susan Sontag in her 2002 St Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation, where she emphasised that “translation is the circulatory system of the world’s literatures” (Sontag). Over the last three decades, there has been expanding interest in the historical and sociological background of the people – literary translators – who do this kind of work for a living. As Peter France and Stuart Gillespie observe in the opening pages of the multi-volume *Oxford History of Literary Translation into English*, “the history of translation is also the history of translators” (France, Gillespie vii). However, echoing the title of the eminent scholar Lawrence Venuti’s influential 1995 book *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, these translators have not always been visible (Venuti “The Translator’s Invisibility”), although nowadays there are

rising calls for change as exemplified by prominent literary translator Jeremy Tiang's recent essay on the topic (Tiang) as well as by Venuti's own comments on current developments (Venuti "Spokesperson, Intellectual, and... More"). This has been mirrored by other modern changes to language-related occupations, where professional activities have widened to encompass not only long-standing forms of translation and interpreting (such as conference interpreting, community/public service interpreting, technical translation etc.) but also newer aspects such as transcreation, audiovisual translation, and post-editing, to which can be added the novel concept of 'translator *plus*' and the awareness of the extra competitive advantage that translational professionals can bring to the modern-day corporate environment (see Spinzi).

Yet the field of literary translation (and consequently, literary translators) still retains a certain mystique, though recent times have seen various empirical studies which have been conducted to explore the habitus of literary translators in different contexts and domains. As outlined by the author elsewhere, these include historically-focused analyses, such as those contained in the impactful edited volume on *Literary Translator Studies* (Kaindl, Kolb, Schlager), as well as insightful studies on the modern-day environment in the Central European context. These include the analyses conducted by Klaudia Bednárová-Gibová and Mária Majherová on literary translators in Slovakia both discretely (Bednárová-Gibová, Majherová "Academic Literary Translators") and within the framework of the broader translation market there (Bednárová-Gibová, Majherová "A Socio-Psychological Profiling of Translators as Working Agents in the Language Industry"), as well as Ágnes Orzóy's interview-based study of six literary translators working either from Hungarian into English or from English into Hungarian (Orzóy). Indeed, it could be posited that when contrasted with other kinds of practitioners in the translational occupations, literary translators may often be viewed as a prestigious niche within the wider professional context. In sociological terms, taking the notion of elite status propounded by Shamus Khan, an American sociologist (see Khan), the author's previous theoretically-based research examined literary translators as a sociological elite (Hoyte-West "Literary Translators as an Elite"). Indeed, this preliminary analysis argued that in terms of their political, social, cultural, and knowledge-based capital, there were solid grounds for considering them as an elite, but this was not so much with regard to their economic clout.

Nonetheless, the crucial role of literary translators is especially accentuated with regard to the means of how smaller literatures and cultures become part of the world literary system, as demonstrated by Nicky van Es and Johan Heilbron in their sociological analysis of the Dutch- language context (see van Es, Heilbron). This exploratory study, consequently, looks at literary translators of smaller languages in a specific market – the United Kingdom –

and is a component of a larger project which brings together studies profiling various awards and prizes for literary translation with examinations of occupational status in the broader translation and interpreting professions (see e.g., Hoyte-West “The Professional Status of Conference Interpreters”; Hoyte-West “No Longer Elite?”). In terms of scope, the impetus for the current overview came directly from the author’s own experience. Although not currently a practising literary translator, in 2018 the author was selected for a two-day advanced Catalan-English literary translation workshop which was held at the Centre for Catalan Studies at Queen Mary University of London, led by the eminent British translator of Catalan literature, Peter Bush (see Institut Ramon Llull). This experience encouraged academic reflection on the issue of the intersection of translators and literature in the unique context of the United Kingdom, to which the current study aims to contribute in a preliminary manner.

Turning to the issue of ‘smaller’ languages, these can also be defined in manifold ways depending on the situation. For example, examples of other terms which may be heard could include “peripheral”, “less widely-spoken”, “minority”, or “less commonly-taught” languages, each of which can be interpreted in various ways in different circumstances. For the purposes of this study – as was also the case with the author’s recent study of two major United Kingdom-based literary translation awards (Hoyte-West “Exploring the Presence of Smaller Literatures”) – the definition adopted here is that stated by Rajendra Chitnis and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen in the opening remarks (Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen) to their 2020 edited volume on smaller literatures in the European context (see Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen, Atkin, Milutinović “Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations”). In that regard, ‘small’ correlates to the size of a given language’s presence in a relevant publishing market, rather than to the number of speakers or other historical, sociocultural, and ideological issues.

Moving to the specific case of the United Kingdom, in general terms translated literature was not so prominent in the British context, thus reflecting Venuti’s observation that “literary translation remains an elite niche in anglophone publishing” (Venuti “Spokesperson, Intellectual, and... More?”). Indeed, a recent article on the International Booker Prize website noted that “translated fiction holds a unique - though historically overlooked place - in the publishing world, especially in the UK” (Mackay-Smith). Various reasons have underpinned this state of affairs. English, the main language of the United Kingdom (the country has no official language), has also become the principal global lingua franca, thus predominating as the primary language of international communication (Crystal). In addition, the often peripheral role of teaching and learning modern languages in British schools has led to relatively low levels of proficiency in foreign languages among the wider population. By

way of example, almost two-thirds of British participants (61%) surveyed in a 2012 Eurobarometer study could not conduct a conversation in a language other than English (European Commission “Europeans and their Languages”). In terms of promoting language learning in traditional pedagogical settings, as Elspeth Broady illustrates, the situation appears to have become more challenging in the aftermath of Brexit (Broady). This general perception towards languages in the United Kingdom seems to have ramifications not only for the language industry, but also for the role of foreign languages and cultures in broader society, including for literary translation. Indeed, it was previously widely stated that just 3% of the literature available on the British market was translated literature. A decade ago, a report by Jasmine Donahaye examined this assertion comprehensively but found there to be a dearth of available data (Donahaye); however, in 2015, it was asserted that 7% of all book sales in the United Kingdom were of translated works (Erizanu). This can be contrasted with the situation for many smaller national publishing markets, where translated literature is a much bigger mainstay of the book market. As Natália Rondzиковá highlights in her overview of the Slovak literary translation scene, data showed that in the early years of the past decade over three-quarters of books published in Czechia and Slovakia were in fact translations from other languages (Rondzиковá 101-102).

As outlined by Richard Mansell, the reasons for this growth are manifold, including changes to traditional patterns and frameworks encouraged by increasing globalisation (Mansell). As such, borders and boundaries are being eroded and becoming more fluid, and thus the role of translators and the publishing industry is also evolving. In the British context, these developments have been accompanied by growing interest from newspapers and other media in literary translation, translation prizes, and literary translators, as well as other agents in the publishing process. This was demonstrated by an article in *The Guardian* in October 2022 entitled “4 Nobels and Counting” which profiled Fitzcarraldo Editions, a small British-based publisher of translated fiction whose roster includes the translations of four recent Nobel Prize in Literature laureates (Svetlana Alexievich, Annie Ernaux, Elfriede Jelinek, and Olga Tokarczuk) (see Cafolla). Indeed, with the award of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature to Norwegian author and playwright Jon Fosse (whose works are also published by Fitzcarraldo Editions), the publisher was once again featured in the British press (see Kerridge). Scholars have also demonstrated increasing interest in the topic too, as illustrated by an inter-institutional project which was awarded funding by the prestigious Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen, Atkin, Milutinović “Translating the Literatures of Smaller European Nations: A Picture from the UK, 2014-16”) as well as the previously-mentioned edited volume on the topic which followed afterwards (Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen,

Atkin, Milutinović “Translating the Literatures of Smaller European Nations”).

As such, and as additionally noted in the introductory section, the present article represents an important component of the author’s wider overview of selected literary-translation related aspects in the United Kingdom, as has been illustrated by his previous work on the presence of smaller languages in translation prizes (Hoyte-West “The EBRD Literature Prize”), the winners of such prizes (Hoyte-West “A Talented Few?”), as well as literary translator education (Hoyte-West “University-based Training Courses for Literary Translators”). Like the other parts of this project, the present study is foundational and synoptic in character and is based on qualitative desk-based analysis (Bassot) of relevant open-access online sources, opening the door to more extensive survey or interview-based research at a subsequent point in time. In bringing together the findings of the author’s abovementioned previous research, the key aim of this contribution is to synthesise general information regarding the visibility of literary translators of smaller languages in the United Kingdom. Accordingly, it is founded on examining three aspects: firstly, the current landscape of literary translation prizes in the United Kingdom; secondly, the various options for literary translator training in the United Kingdom; and finally, on exploring the current frameworks that promote the broader visibility of literary translators in the United Kingdom.

Literary translators of smaller languages: Prizes, training, and wider visibility

It is well-known that prizes can be important in endowing greater prestige and attracting attention (see e.g. the monograph by English), although, as observed by Swedish scholars Alva Dahl and Elin Svahn, translation studies scholarship has generally not devoted much attention to them (Dahl, Svahn). For literary translators in the United Kingdom, the main ones at present include the Booker International Prize, which is awarded each year. For the first decade since it was awarded for the first time in 2005, the format of the prize recognised the totality of a given foreign author’s literary production. However, in 2016 the rules and regulations of the prize were changed. Since then, a single literary work translated into English has been recognised, with the sum of GBP 50,000 divided between the author of the prize-winning work and the book’s translator (The Booker Prizes).

A further major award is the EBRD Literature Prize, which was first presented in 2018. As mentioned more extensively elsewhere (Hoyte-West “The EBRD Literature Prize”), this prize was set up by the London-based European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) with the dedicated remit of promoting works from less-translated languages. Also

awarded annually, the prize money of 20,000 EUR is split between the author and the literary translator of the winning book (see EBRD).

The third award presented, and which is also discussed in more detail in the author's comparative study (Hoyte-West "Exploring the Presence of Smaller Literatures) is the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize. Named after the late publisher George Weidenfeld and awarded by a consortium of three colleges of the University of Oxford together with the University's Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation research centre, this prize again recognises a single literary work translated into English. First awarded over two decades ago, the winnings of 2,000 GBP are given to the work's literary translator (see OCCT "The Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize").

The last featured award, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, is linked with the University of Warwick, and was inaugurated in 2017. This award recognises the best translation of a source work originally written by a woman author (there is no stipulation for the translator to necessarily be female), and comes with a prize of 1,000 GBP which again is shared equally between the author and the literary translator (University of Warwick "The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation").

With the exception of the EBRD Literature Prize, none of these major awards focus specifically on smaller languages and literatures. However, as illustrated in the author's recent comparison of the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize and the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, translated works from smaller literatures are indeed strongly present in the shortlists and winners of these prestigious prizes for literary translation (Hoyte-West "Exploring the Presence of Smaller Literatures").

Several other prizes also recognise literary translation from smaller literatures, either explicitly or indirectly. This can be done through named translation awards – for example, the trade union for British writers, the Society of Authors, has the Vondel Prize for Dutch, the TLS-Risa Domb/Porjes Prize for Hebrew, the Bernard Shaw prize for Swedish, the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic, and the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation Translation Prize for Japanese (The Society of Authors "Translation Prizes"). The John Dryden Translation Competition also accepts literary translations of prose, poetry, or drama from any language into English (see British Comparative Literature Association), and the famous Stephen Spender Prize for poetry also enables entries from any world language into English to be submitted (Stephen Spender Trust "Stephen Spender Prize"); through its 'Spotlight' initiative, it also showcases a relevant language each year (in 2023, for example, the focus is on poetry in Ukrainian – see Stephen Spender Trust "Ukrainian Spotlight 2023"). The Sarah Maguire Prize, offered by the London-based Poetry Translation Centre, recognises the best English translation of a poetry collection written by a poet who is based outside of Europe, thus

shedding light on creative output from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and beyond (see Poetry Translation Centre). And since it was launched in 2010, the list of languages for the biannual (previously yearly) Harvill Secker Prize for Young Translators, which is run by Penguin Books and foregrounds emerging literary translators aged between 18-34, has included several smaller languages such as Bengali, Indonesian, Japanese, and Polish (see Penguin).

Indeed, smaller literatures have gained prominence in the winning entries for several of the major literary translation prizes. This included media interest in the 2019 winner of the EBRD Literature Prize, *The Devils' Dance*, by Hamid Ismailov. Translated by Donald Rayfield with John Farnon, it was the first novel ever to have been translated directly from Uzbek into English (Flood “First Uzbek Novel Translated into English”). A further example is the well-known case of Deborah Smith and her success in the 2016 Booker Prize for her translation of *The Vegetarian* by the Korean author Han Kang (Flood “Man Booker International Prize Serves Up Victory to The Vegetarian”). As observed elsewhere, smaller literatures have also featured encouragingly on the shortlists (see Hoyte-West “Exploring the Presence of Smaller Literatures”), thus increasing the breadth and diversity of translated literature available to the book-buying public across the United Kingdom and beyond.

Moving on to issues of literary translator education, the availability of appropriate training is of course important in the professionalisation process within the translational occupations (Tseng), and there are many universities and other institutions in the United Kingdom offering courses and degrees in translation studies. However, despite a strong showing in pre-Brexit versions of the European Masters in Translation network (European Commission “60 Universities Receive ‘European Master's in Translation’ Label”), the author’s previous work outlined that there were just three named postgraduate courses focusing solely on literary translation (Hoyte-West “University-based Training Courses”). To summarise the findings here, these programmes were the MA Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (University of East Anglia “MA Literary Translation”), the MA Literary Translation Studies at the University of Warwick in Coventry (see University of Warwick “Literary Translation Studies”), and the MA in Audiovisual and Literary Translation at the University of Essex in Colchester (see University of Essex). In terms of smaller languages, both the MAs at East Anglia and Warwick were open to applicants working from any language into English. Additionally, the Warwick course stated specifically that literary translators of several smaller languages – such as Welsh, Catalan, and Mandarin Chinese – had previously taken part in the course (see University of Warwick “MA in Literary Translation Studies”). The course at the University of Essex worked from specific language combinations which included languages which are less-commonly

taught in the British context such as Arabic and Portuguese (see University of Essex).

Turning to non-degree programmes such as professional training courses, many options are available in the United Kingdom. These include the Emerging Translator Mentorships scheme developed by the National Centre for Writing (see National Centre for Writing “Home”), an organisation which is based in Norwich, a UNESCO City of Literature (see Cities of Literature “Norwich”). This annual initiative pairs a novice literary translator with an experienced practitioner with deep knowledge of the profession. Both translators usually, but not exclusively, work into English from the same language pair. In the 2022/2023 group, smaller languages were particularly well-represented, with mentorships available from Arabic, Danish, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Polish, Swedish, and Ukrainian; French – specifically, Quebec French, itself a smaller literature – was also offered (National Centre for Writing “NCW Emerging Translator Mentorships 2022/2023”). For the current 2023/2024 academic year, alongside provision for Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Polish, and Swiss German, applications from mentees working from Quebec French and First Nations languages (listed “Algonquin, Atikamekw, Cree, Innu, Inuktitut, Micmac, [and] Mohawk”) as well as from the languages of Singapore (listed as “Malay, Singaporean Mandarin, Tamil, Kristang or other minority languages”) are also encouraged (National Centre for Writing “Apply Now”), thereby demonstrating a strong commitment to promoting literary translation from these languages.

Further educational options in the British context are provided by several of the literary translation summer schools which are typically associated with leading universities. By way of example, these include the British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School, offered in Norwich by the University of East Anglia (see University of East Anglia “BCLT Summer School”), the University of Bristol’s ‘Bristol Translates’ literary translation summer school (see University of Bristol), and the Warwick Translates Summer School which was last offered by the University of Warwick before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Warwick “Warwick Translates Summer School”). Several of these courses have included smaller languages paired with English. For example, the most recent 2023 edition of BCLT Summer School offered Arabic, Korean, and Japanese (see University of East Anglia “BCLT Summer School”); and the Bristol Translates summer course had Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, and Japanese among the languages featured; bursaries are commonly available for participation for specific language pairs which may also feature smaller languages (University of Bristol). In addition, there are also relevant one-off workshops for smaller languages available such as the previously-mentioned one attended by the author on Catalan-English literary translation (Institut Ramon Llull). These can

be subsidised (and in some cases, fully-funded) by different sources, including universities, foreign governments, as well as international cultural organisations and institutes.

With regard to the broader visibility of literary translators in the United Kingdom, several organisations are working together to raise awareness and thus enhance the visible presence of literary translators. These include advocacy-related activities by the Society of Authors' Translation Association, which is also part of CEATL (*Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires*, the European Council of Literary Translators' Associations), an organisation with the responsibility for representing the literary translation profession at an international level (The Society of Authors "Translators Association"). In addition, many practicing literary translators are active on social media (especially on the social network formerly known as Twitter, now X), often posting relevant content regarding the broader profession. This has included the *#namethetranslator* campaign (The Society of Authors "Name the Translator") which through promotion of the hashtag aims towards increased acknowledgement of literary translators in published texts. Indeed, this call for the enhanced visibility of literary translators has garnered media attention over the last couple of years (see e.g., Croft, also Khomami). As such, it is part of a Europe-wide initiative which is gathering steam, as demonstrated by the 2022 publication of *Translators on the Cover*, a report by the European Commission which examined the current situation of literary translation as well as moves toward greater recognition of literary translators within the international publishing industry (see European Commission "Translators on the Cover").

As mentioned previously, there has been consistent media interest regarding literary translation in the British context, as has been regularly illustrated in the literary and cultural sections of several leading newspapers. This includes the books section of prominent broadsheets, where reviews of translated fiction are often featured (see *The Guardian*). In addition, numerous events take place which focus on translation and the promotion of it to a broader audience. Quite often, these are linked to universities; to give the University of Oxford as an example, initiatives held at that institution include Oxford Translation Day (organised by Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation, who also award the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize; see OCCT "Oxford Translation Day") as well as the Translation Exchange project initiated by one of the oldest colleges (see *The Queen's College*). Notably, these schemes often seek to go beyond the ivory tower to engage secondary school pupils and their teachers, as well as other interested parties. Generally, these schemes do not specifically name smaller languages (an exception is the previously-mentioned Spotlight initiative from the Stephen Spender Trust; see Stephen Spender Trust "Ukrainian Spotlight 2023") but rather, given the at-times peripheral notion of

languages in the United Kingdom context, these initiatives serve to raise awareness of the practice, craft, and importance of literary translation among a broader public.

Some concluding remarks

The observations contained in this article have illustrated that the visibility of translators of smaller languages is increasing in the United Kingdom. This evolving status is owing to a variety of factors, including greater prominence and publicity accorded to translated literature in various domains. This includes the relatively recent establishment – or relaunching – of prominent literary translation awards with significant prize funds, where entries involving smaller languages have often accrued significant attention not only regarding the shortlists, but also in the wider media. This media attention has also extended to profiling winners of these prizes. Although the number of named postgraduate degrees in literary translation may appear somewhat limited, this is counterpointed by the large number of intensive training courses and mentorships which are regularly offered for literary translators working in a smaller language paired with English.

In terms of professional visibility, it is clear that there are active voices advocating for the rights of literary translators, including supranational participation in international campaigns. At the domestic level, there are several awareness-raising schemes to draw attention to literary translation, especially among the younger generation, though these generally have a broader focus than solely on smaller languages. Yet, in terms of the current visibility of literary translators of smaller languages in the United Kingdom, these continued projects do indeed seem encouraging. Though this is of course a work in progress, the future certainly looks hopeful, with all of the various awards, educational opportunities, and other initiatives serving to raise awareness of the practice, craft, and importance of literary translation among the wider British public.

Note

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