

Translators and Translation in the Public Sphere in Latvia in the 21st Century

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Abstract. Translated fiction has had a special place in Latvian book publishing since its beginnings in the 16th century. It has not changed even in the 21st century. High-quality translation and publishing of fiction is still unthinkable without enterprising and responsible publishers, which attract highly qualified translators. However, due to the Internet and social media, in the 21st century in Latvia the translators themselves more and more frequently gain recognition in the public sphere. Without the mediation of publishing houses, translators communicate with readers both on the Internet and at various events, – these communications often include the issues related to translation (translation quality, new words in translations, training of new translators, etc.). In other words, translators are playing an increasingly prominent role in the book publishing cycle. The research revealed an abundant range of activities related to translators and translation, confirming the important position thereof not only in the book publishing, but also in Latvian cultural life.

Keywords: translators, translation, public sphere, Latvia, 21st century

Introduction

The theory of book publishing historically has considered the making of a book as a set of sequential steps as depicted, for example, in Robert Darnton's and John Feather's "communications circuit" (Darnton 1982; Darnton 2007; Feather 2003), without specifically highlighting the translator and translation. However, in the 21st century, the theory is also seeking wherefrom, how and in what way to depict the translator and translation, for example, Marie-Alice Belle's and Brenda M. Hosington's model for the study of printed translations in early modern Britain (Belle, Hosington 2017).

In the research dedicated to Latvian book publishing (hereby comprising both the book publishing in the territory of Latvia and Latvian publishing), there is no lack of studies dedicated to significant publishing houses, individual publishers,

or thematic publications, such as fiction, including translations from foreign languages. Likewise, the researchers have focussed on the work of libraries and their history. Admittedly, the translators (albeit an integral part of translation) are not particularly highlighted in the research of Latvian book publishing. Book publishing is not separated from literature as a cultural industry in general. Both the artistic and content quality of publications are evaluated annually. Although not regularly, the accomplishments of the translators are also assessed, thus highlighting the role of translation in Latvia and Latvian book publishing.

Research “Translators and translation in the public sphere in Latvia in the 21st century” (spanning the period from 2001 to 2023) is part of the master’s thesis “Translations of German fiction in Latvian book publishing from 1991 to 2000” (supervisor professor Viesturs Zanders) (Kronbergs 2023), which is the first attempt to examine German fiction translated from 1991 to 2000 in the context of Latvian book publishing. The material of feasibility research confirmed that translators and translation can be seen both as an increasingly prominent part of the successive stages of book publishing, as well as visible actors in the public sphere and field of activity. Published translated fiction continues its life for a long time both in readers’ homes and public libraries. The Internet enables continuation of the virtual conversation involving author, publisher, translator, and reader. Translators and translation are no longer an anonymous and unknown part of the creation of a book but are increasingly visible and understandable. The year 2001 was set as the reference point for the research – the beginning of the 21st century and the start time for the Internet in households.

Statistics show the numerical volume of work carried out by translators most accurately. “Data array on publishing activity in Latvia: 1991–2022” (Latvijas Nacionālās bibliotēkas Bibliogrāfijas institūts 2023) created by the Institute of Bibliography of the Latvian National Library is currently the most accurate source of information that describes the book publishing of Latvia in numbers. Statistics clearly demonstrate that translators and translation play an important role in Latvian book publishing.

From 1991 to 2022, 69 877 books have been published in Latvia (annual average – 2183 books), of which 21 061 books are fiction (an average of 658 books per year). The aforementioned data confirm that fiction makes up 30.1% of the total number of published books, and underscores its prominent place in Latvia’s book publishing after the restoration of independence in 1990/1991.

From 1991 to 2022, the translations of a total of 21 490 books (representing various subjects, including fiction) from foreign languages were published in Latvia, in other words – 30.7% of the total number of publications. The publications represent the translations from foreign languages into Latvian (more than 50 languages), as well as the translations from the Latvian language into foreign languages (1783 books), including fiction (215 books).

From 1991 to 2022, the translated fiction comprised 9 987 books in Latvia (14.3% of the total number of published books, 47.4% of the total number of fiction). The most popular source languages are:

- English – with 5310 books (7.6% of the total number of published books, 25.2% of the total number of fiction, 53.17% of the total number of translated fiction books);
- German – with 1181 books (1.7% of the total number of published books, 5.6% of the total number of fiction, 11.82% of the total number of translated fiction);
- French – with 781 books (1.1% of the total number of published books, 3.7% of the total number of fiction, 7.82% of the total number of translated fiction);
- Russian – with 589 books (0.8% of the total number of published books, 2.8% of the total number of fiction, 5.9% of the total number of translated fiction);
- Swedish – with 359 books (0.5% of the total number of published books, 1.7% of the total number of fiction, 3.6% of the total number of translated fiction).

As the data shows, the “source language leader five” of translated fiction occupies a dominant position with 8 220 books (12.6% of the total number of published books, 41.8% of the total number of fiction and 88.3% of the total number of translated fiction).

Summing up, it can be established that there is an abundance of translations, yet are the translators visible in the public sphere? Is their place in the book publishing cycle understandable, including for the publishers themselves? Are they valued by the public and/or those involved in book publishing? No less important is the question of whether it is understandable what translation is – how to ensure its quality (education, human resources, and time resources)? To acquire a comprehensive answer to the questions raised above, a much more extensive research would be needed, however, the obtained results outline the first convincing answers.

Results

Roberto Calasso (1941–2021), who was not only a writer and translator, but also a book publisher, said: “[...] A good publishing house is – if I may be allowed a tautology – like one that publishes, as far as possible, “only” good books. So, to use a simplified definition, books that the publisher is proud of rather than ashamed of. [...]” (Kalaso 2021). On the one hand, it seems that such criteria – “pride” and “shame” – are almost impossible to apply. On the other hand, the challenge of maintaining, evaluating and even increasing quality is

possible both in the book publishing in general and also in the work of translators. A proof of this is “*Zelta ābele*” (Golden Appletree) book art competition held by the Latvian Publishers’ Association (Latvijas Grāmatizdevēju asociācija 2023) since 1993, in which the prize-winning places have, among other publications, been taken by translations of fiction. Along with the optimism of the approaching turn of the century, in 2000, the Latvian Writers’ Union (Latvijas Rakstnieku savienība 2023) started organizing *Latvijas Literatūras gada balva* (The Annual Latvian Literature Award) – a competition aiming to provide the annual “evaluation of the literary creative work of Latvian writers and translators”, in which there is also a place for nominations in the category *Labākais ārvalstu literatūras tulkojums latviešu valodā* (Best translation of foreign literature into Latvian).

Not only the society of the 1990s, but also those involved in the book publishing have gradually accepted that part of the activities of the public sphere (communication) will take place in the virtual environment (in Latvia, the news portal “*Delfi*” started its work in 1999, and in 2000, the news portals “*TVNet*” and “*Apollo*”). In 2000, the magazine “*Grāmatu apskats*” (Book Review) published by the Latvian Booksellers’ Association, which had been issued since 1994 and was a regular source of information about the history of Latvia’s and Latvian book publishing, ceased to exist. It can be said that 2001, when the Internet gradually changed from an exclusive service to a utility for every household, marked a departure point for a new stage in thinking.

The beginning of the influence of social media in the first decade of the 21st century gave translators the opportunity to become visible in the literal sense of the word, moreover – this was a chance to communicate with readers without the mediation of the publisher and the usual (classical) media.

Silvia Brice, who describes the translator’s work: “A translator cannot live in a barrel and only peek through the spigot hole, then he will not know and understand much from the world he has to translate” (Dibovska 2021), has even published a book – “*Baigās piezīmes*” (The Crazy Notes) (Brice 2020) with texts created on the social networking platform *Facebook* (without the prior intention to collect and publish them in a single volume).

Apart from the activities already mentioned and continuing from the 20th century, the public sphere in Latvia in the 21st century has given rise to the measures encompassing activities such as translators’ public relations and promoting awareness of the importance of translators/translation, competitions as tests/certificates of language knowledge, competitions/awards highlighting translators and translation, and publications/books as a way to “capture” translators, translation and industry discussion. In the following material, some of the most important activities are listed sequentially by year.

Since 2001, the European Day of Languages has been celebrated on 26 September in 46 member states of the Council of Europe, in which “[...]”

special attention is paid to the diversity of languages and their learning [...]” (“LV portāls”/Latvijas Republikas oficiālais izdevējs “Latvijas Vēstnesis” 2021). In Latvia, the European Language Day is organized and coordinated by the Latvian Language Agency together with cooperation partners (Latviešu valodas aģentūra 2022), particularly noteworthy activities include an opportunity to communicate with native speakers, for example, during the events held in the European Union House (Eiropas Savienības māja 2022).

International Writers’ and Translators’ House in Ventspils has been operating since 2006, and the necessity of a residency for creative work can best be judged by its users, including translators (Ventspils Starptautiskā Rakstnieku un tulkotāju māja 2023). Notably, since 2008, when the residency in cooperation with the municipality of Ventspils created “*Sudraba tintnīca*” (Silver Inkwell) – an award honouring a work of poetry, prose or a translation to and from Latvian which has been created in this residency, the translator’s work is highlighted in a specific format of recognition, simultaneously strengthening the prestige of a good translation (Ventspils Starptautiskā Rakstnieku un tulkotāju māja 2022).

Since 2008, the certified translation office “*Skrivanek Baltic*” in cooperation with universities that offer education and develop research in the field of translation, implements “*Labākais jaunais tulkotājs*” (Best Young Translator) competition for Latvian students (Sertificēts tulkošanas birojs “Skrivanek Baltic” 2022b). Its purpose is “To promote students’ interest in the profession of translator, to introduce the work of a translator in a modern language service company”, and it should be noted that the source languages of student assignments are English, French and German (Sertificēts tulkošanas birojs “Skrivanek Baltic” 2022a).

In 2012, the German Union of Latvia, in cooperation with several institutions, including the Riga Central Library, implemented a cycle of meetings “*Restartējot saknes: es protu vācu valodu*” (Restarting the roots: I know German), the purpose of which was “[...] to promote the prestige of the German language in Latvia. At a time when English has acquired the status of the main foreign language as if it were self-evident, not only in Latvia, but also in other parts of the world, there are still people who also appreciate the advantages of knowing the German language” (Portāls “*Bibliotēka.lv*” 2012). In one of the meetings, the translator from German language, Inese Mičule, talked about her work.

“*Dzintara Soduma balva*” (Dzintars Sodums Award) in literature has been established in 2013. One of its goals is “[...] to popularize and support Latvian writing, promoting the development and preservation of the Latvian language [...]” (Ogres novada pašvaldība 2023), and the translators have been among its recipients. It was awarded twice to the translator Silvija Brice – in 2018 the first award was given for the translation of the German writer Günter Grass’s book “*Vonne Endlichkait*” (“Of all that ends”/“*Par beidzamību*”) (Ikšķiles novada pašvaldības informatīvais izdevums “*Ikšķiles Vēstis*” 2018), while the second award honoured

the book “Baigās piezīmes” – the translator’s debut as a writer (Kultūras un patstāvīgas domas interneta žurnāls “Satori” 2021).

In 2014, the Latvian Language Agency organized the conversation series “*Valoda tulkojumā*” (Language in translation), which was dedicated to translations of fiction into Latvian: “[...] Translators of works of poetry, prose, and drama [...] interpret the soulful experience of other cultures, while enriching their native language and trying to retain what has been expressed in another language. [...]” (Latviešu valodas aģentūra 2014). Notably, – and it can be considered a special case, – both the texts and photos of the aforementioned conversation series, as well as the reports of the European Day of Languages conference “*Valoda tulkojumā*” (Language in translation) held in 2014, are collected in the book “*Valoda tulkojumā. Intervijas. Konference. Diskusija*” (Language in translation. Interviews. Conference. Discussion) (Rožkalne 2015), thereby making a significant contribution to highlighting the importance of the field of translation.

From 2018 to 2023, more than 20 events were (and most likely will continue to be) organized in the museums of the Association of Memorial Museums – Andrejs Upītis Memorial Museum, Rainis and Aspazija House, Jānis Akuraters Museum (Memoriālo muzeju apvienība 2023), which focused on translators and translation, including the event series “*Svētā Hieronīma mantojums*” (Saint Jerome’s Legacy, meetings with translators) and “*Pasaules literatūras vakari*” (Evenings of World Literature, meetings with both translators and writers). Special mention should be made of the lecture by Ivars Šteinbergs “*Ieskats tulkošanas teorijās un atdzejas problemātikā*” (Insight into the theories of translation and the problems of poetry translation) held in 2021 (Memoriālo muzeju apvienība 2021).

In 2019 and 2020, the Goethe-Institut Riga implemented the project “*Übersetzungen entdecken*” (“*Atrasts tulkojumā*”/Found in translation), which focused on “[...] books, writers, translators, publishers and also readers. [...]” (Gētes institūts Rīgā 2023a). Since the published information is still publicly available on the Internet, it can be considered that the above project continues even now, for example, providing a wide range of users, starting with librarians and ending with readers in regions, with a useful selection “*Deutschsprachige Bücher in lettischer Übersetzung*” (“*Vācu valodā sarakstīto grāmatu tulkojumi latviešu valodā*”/Translations of books written in German into Latvian) (Gētes institūts Rīgā 2023b), which encompasses the information starting from 2000.

In 2021, the University of Latvia Press published the book by Andrejs Veisbergs, professor at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Latvia “*Tulkojumi latviešu valodā. 16.–20. gadsimta ainava*” (Translations into Latvian. 16th–20th century landscape) (Veisbergs 2022), which “[...] examines translations published in Latvian, mostly fiction. The main focus is on revealing trends and patterns, rather than analysing specific works or translators” (Kazakeviča 2022). It is the first collection of information, reviewing such an extensive time,

implementing a popular scientific approach and employing living language, as well as an analytically critical approach. The ability of Veisbergs to connect his field of research interest – translation science – with literary science, book publishing and general data, as well as the context characterizing the era is particularly valuable and noteworthy. Likewise, the concisely presented, abundantly collected information on translation reviews must be noted. Admittedly, compared to other chapters, the information about the 1990s is rather sparse and laconic.

From 2021 to 2025, the National Library of Latvia in cooperation with several institutions, including the Latvian Radio, implements the series of broadcasts “*Latviešu grāmatai 500*” (Latvian Book Turns 500), in which “[...] we highlight the most important processes that once set in motion the spread of the Latvian written and printed word” (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka 2023). A significant part of the content consists of information about both the birth of Latvian book publishing and translations from the German language. From the perspective of popularizing science, including book publishing, the Latvian Radio broadcast “*Grāmatai pa pēdām. Latviešu grāmatai 500*” (In the Footsteps of the Book. Latvian Book Turns 500) (Latvijas Radio 2023) is particularly noteworthy.

Conclusions

The research dedicated to translators and translation in the public sphere in Latvia in the 21st century confirms the important place of translation in the cultural landscape of Latvia – forging the connection with the world, introducing the vastness of the world to “small” Latvia, fostering the exchange of ideas with and about others, as well as meeting the need of creating new Latvian words. Furthermore, it is advanced by the already irreplaceable impact of digital communication on working with the audience, attracting it to activities that take place in physical presence. The current research also confirms that it is always possible to create new ideas on how to work with the audience and promote its intellectual capacity, including understanding and perception of translated fiction. It is no less important that the ideas created in the 1990s and early 21st century continue to exist, moreover – thanks to the media in the digital environment, they acquire a much broader resonance than that which was made possible only by existence in print and/or by the means of radio/television (for example, digital public vote in the “*Zelta ābele*” book art competition or the annual competition for Latvian Literature Award).

Notably, translations constitute a valuable and irreplaceable contribution to the availability of foreign fiction in Latvia, as well as intercultural dialogue. Both studies and reflections on translations are also published in the books of “classical format”. The typographic presentation of the editions is of an outstanding quality and appreciated by the public. In the public sphere, events involving translators,

translation, and translations (especially fiction) addressed to different audiences appear regularly. Numerous translators (S. Brice, as well as Edvīns Raups, Dace Meiere, Kārlis Vērdiņš, Maima Grinberga, Ieva Lešinska-Geibere, Guntars Godiņš, Ingmāra Balode, Marians Rižijs, Māra Poļakova, Dens Dimiņš and others) have become publicly recognised and frequently in the spotlight of media attention (even beyond the matters of translation).

On a downside, a topical question remains: is it really necessary to translate all the the texts that are being translated? Would it be possible to “improve” (to influence) the taste of readers, as well as the book publishers themselves, and with what financially supported tools? How to promote, for example, the wider translation of the fiction of a less “influential” (also – numerically smaller) language? In future research, it would be essential to analyse the quality of translations and, looking even more broadly, the book publishing as an important branch of Latvian culture. The quality of typographic presentation and design is praised, but is the translated content equally praiseworthy? The field of theatre and art reviews thrive in Latvia, but only in rare cases the reviews address the quality of the translation.

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