

Who Chooses Literature for Translation? Translation Subsidies in Germany

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Based on the assumption that the translation of literature can be considered a social practice, this article examines two German subsidy programs in order to illustrate the literature selection process within the context of asymmetric international translation patterns.

Keywords: book market / editorial policy / literary translation / international translation patterns / translation subsidies / Germany

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Translation subsidies: “subordinate decisions”?

Discussions regarding the selection of literature for translation focus above all on the role of the editor and the publisher, agents that Michaela Wolf considers to be the main authorities in the literary field (Wolf, “Zum ‘sozialen Sinn’” 266). Within the complex network of closely interrelated agents, editors act as both initiators of translations and gatekeepers with the ability to prevent translations from entering the book market. Their sphere of influence extends to the acceptance of new translations and to the readers themselves. German publisher Samuel Fischer once displayed how much influence he has over what is deemed worthy of being published and read by defining the editorial mission: “To impose new values upon the readers, which they do not want, that is the most important and beautiful task of the publisher” (Mendelssohn 5).¹ Social decisions regarding the promotion of translations differ from editorial decisions. First, subsidy program selections are usually based on editors’ decisions. Their selections can therefore be termed “subordinate decisions.” Second, a promotion society’s choice can affirm, correct, or even negate a publisher’s decision. If the society and the editor share common values, only then is it more likely that both will decide in favor of an identical translation project.

Providing support for certain translation projects thus goes together with determining which titles are of special relevance. Subsidy distribution becomes a method of co-deciding the future of certain translated literature.

Arguing that the selection of literature for translation is a socially-conditioned process, this article addresses the preconditions for making those decisions regarding translations as well as the impact those decisions have upon the book and translation markets. The central question of my investigation is whether translation subsidy programs (especially those in favor of literary production by “small” languages and marginalized literatures) create a change in the asymmetric literary exchange between nations. Or, are the mostly state-funded translation assistance programs having no effect on the pattern of international translation? It is not the aim of this article to cover the entire range of subsidies available to publishers and those that support literary translations into German. On the basis of a preliminary analysis of two selected translation subsidy programs run by the Society for Promotion of Literature from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and by the Literary Colloquium in Berlin, which promotes translation of literature from central and eastern Europe, some general characteristics of the relationship between translated literature and mechanisms of international literary exchange are developed.

Choosing literature for translation and the illusion of autonomous choice

My opening argument concerns Pierre Bourdieu and his study of contemporary publishing activities in France entitled “A Conservative Revolution in Publishing.”² Bourdieu exposes the true mechanisms of decision-making in an allegedly autonomous literary field. All titles submitted to compete for translation subsidies are themselves the product of a selection process carried out earlier by translators, literary agents, editors, or (more generally) by “the structural constraints imposed by the field” (Bourdieu, “A Conservative” 137). By calling belief in the autonomous decision-making of publishers “an illusion that promotes ignorance of the field’s many constraints” (124), Bourdieu draws attention to the main principles governing editorial strategies with regard to selection of (translated) works to be added to a publisher’s list. By considering literary translations as having two “antagonistic functions” (147–152), he concludes that publisher strategies for selecting works to be translated correspond with both the publisher’s status in the publishing field (which depends on the amount and composition of the publisher’s capital) and with its “room for maneuver” (137).

Bourdieu's investigation of commonalities within French publishing as well as his study of social conditions within the international circulation of cultural goods (see Bourdieu, "Les conditions") uncovered new questions regarding the sociology of translation. In their article "Outline for a Sociology of Translation," Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro create another framework for analyzing literary translation, describing it as a social practice embedded in a specific social context. Three dimensions must be taken into account. First, we must pay attention to the structure of the international field of cultural exchange. Literary translations must be placed within this space that is structured by hierarchical relations between nations, their languages, and literatures. Second, we must differentiate between various types of constraints that influence the processes of literary exchange. These are mainly political, economic, and cultural dynamics responsible for hierarchy development on the international translation market. Third, the reception of literature must be investigated according to the role of cultural and literary mediators, both institutional and individual, which have a role in the production and distribution of translated literature.³

In outlining the position of the funding bodies in their role as mediators, both the constraints of the market and the nation are crucial elements. From a broader perspective, Sapiro argues that state subsidies can be regarded as a system that protects cultural production (such as translated literature) and is based on merit, not on marketability: "Whereas the market has helped literary activity to free itself from the State control, in the liberal-democratic regime, the State has developed a cultural policy in order to support the pole of restricted production" (Sapiro, "The Literary" 460). The establishment of subsidy systems is therefore "designed in principle to curb the effects of economic constraints in a free-trade democracy, notably the risk of standardization and homogenization among cultural production aimed at the greatest number of consumers" (Heilbron and Sapiro 100). In the given situation, supply and demand are not simply left to the mechanisms of the free market but driven by specific agents and their interests. If the production and distribution of translated literature is subsidized in various ways, the effect on translated literature has to be seen as a social construction, created by translation funding commissions according to their values and preferences. Due to a system of supply based on funding instruments, decisions regarding translation subsidies then also become a force operating upon the translation market and shaping the literary field in general. Funding commissions participate in the establishment of a "historically variable ranking of literary trends, preferences, and movements" (Hagedstedt 306). The "value-oriented agency"⁴ of institutions providing financial support becomes clear through choice of the source

language as well as the translation project, and it implies to a certain degree the significance of literary exchange between two specific languages by means of translations. Funding committees can change “the prevalent architectonics of literary and cultural positioning in favor of institutionalized values” (Dücker and Neumann 17). Translation funding bodies have the ability to confirm or negate an editor’s choice. The translation of literature is therefore determined not only by editor’s choices but also by nomination methods and the preferences of respective funding bodies.

The funding policy of translations: (re)producing the asymmetry of international translation patterns?

The following section examines the characteristics of the global translation market by focusing on the hierarchical (power) relations between nations, literatures, and languages. Studying funding programs that promote the translation of works of fiction requires making a shift from the national to the international book-market as well as a consideration of the models of this global space.⁵ By characterizing the world system of translation as “a transnational cultural field in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense” (Heilbron 432), Johan Heilbron stresses that literary exchanges are always unequal and indicate cultural domination. In terms of both the intensity and direction of translation activities, special attention must be given to the macrostructure of the global translation market:

The intensity of translations, the cultural transfer they cause, as well as the directions they take depend on the position of a specific culture or language and its power in the international field. The translation patterns mirror the hierarchical relations of the global market, similarly to commodity flows (Bachleitner and Wolf 2).

Due to commonalities within the international translation system, the pattern of translations is highly unequal because more works head from the center to the periphery than the other way around. Within the hierarchical structure of hyper-central, central, semi-peripheral, and peripheral languages,⁶ German occupies a central role (Heilbron 434). Bachleitner and Wolf also count German among the languages that dominate the global translation market. Its status can be explained by a long tradition of literary production, an elaborate literary language, well established literary institutions, and a well-educated literary audience (Bachleitner and Wolf 3–4). A distinguishing feature of languages with a central role in the international translation system is their relatively high share of translations – in terms of both import and export of translated titles. Germany’s publishing

market is open to translations from foreign languages and, as current statistics reveal,⁷ 10% of Germany's book production is literary translations.

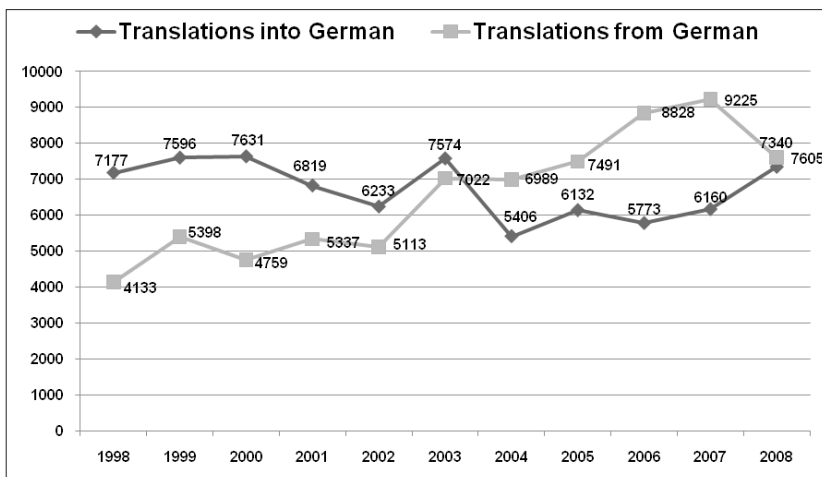


Figure 1: Number of translations into German and from German (according to license sales), 1998–2008

The establishment of subsidy programs that support the import of translations from marginalized languages into German, a central language, can be seen as a reverse of the mechanisms of the international circulation of translations. Here the question can be posed as to whether translation subsidies really operate as “measures in order to minimize the asymmetrical patterns of the translation market” (Bachleitner and Wolf 5). On the other hand, with respect to its degree of centrality, Heilbron also points out that German has “the capacity to function as an intermediary or vehicular language” (435) between semi-peripheral and peripheral languages. In this context, translation subsidies sustain the properties and the patterns of the global market and contribute to the accumulation of “transit profits” for German as an intermediary language. Translation subsidy programs, set up by various institutions, can therefore be seen as an expression of “the strategic effort to accumulate literary capital” (Pölzer 17).

Observing the market: facts about the book market and translations in Germany

Before moving on to direct analysis of subsidy programs, I should briefly describe the translation market in Germany. Having a rich history of tradition, the book market in Germany can be considered as fa-

avorable to translation of literature from foreign languages. According to book translation statistics, in 2008 the proportion of translations represented nearly 9% of total book production in Germany. In the subcategory of works of literary fiction, which includes narrative prose, poetry, and drama, this proportion reached almost 25% in 2008. Special attention must be paid to the source languages of translated literature. Translations from English represent the highest share on the market in Germany, with a total share of nearly 67% in 2008. French ranks second with over 11%. On the *List of Top 10 Source Languages* for translations into German, the other languages – Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Russian, Japanese, Turkish, and Norwegian – trailed far behind in 2008. This list, as well as the *List of Top 20 Source Languages* for translations into German, generally changes very little. Languages such as Polish, Hungarian, Chinese, and Arabic belong to the *List of Top 20* but the proportion of titles translated from these languages into German currently falls under 1% of all translations.⁸ Translations from English – still the dominant source language – increased ten percentage points between 2004 and 2008 (2004: 57%, 2008: 67%). Contrary to this sharp increase, the share of translations from languages not mentioned in the *List of Top 20* dropped significantly during the same period. In 2004, nearly 20% (or 670 works) of translated works were from “small” or minor languages, but this percentage reached only 2% (or 149 works) in 2008.

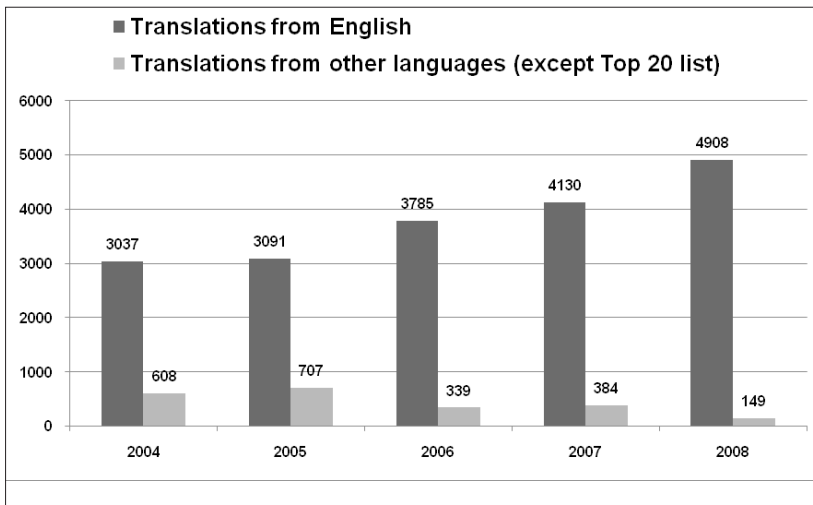


Figure 2: Number of translations from English into German and from languages not included in the *Top 20 List of Languages of Origin for Translations into German*, 2004–2008

Combining these observations together, it must be stressed that the current rise in the number of translations into German is mostly due to literature being translated from English and not from other languages. The role of translation subsidies in favoring small or less regarded languages and literatures deserves closer examination.

Translation subsidies in Germany

The Program of Translation Subsidies, operated by the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian, and Latin American Literature (litprom), was founded in 1984 after the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair's focus on Black Africa. Its founding represents the idea that works of literary fiction from the southern hemisphere are not sufficiently represented on the European book market. The society funds between twenty and thirty translation projects per year, including 573 works of narrative prose, poetry, drama, children's and youth literature, and essays. All were subsidized over the period from 1984 to 2009, among them many first translations of emerging authors from countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malawi, Kenya, and Uruguay.

In 1993, the Program for Promoting the Translation of Fiction from Central and East Europe was established at the Literary Colloquium Berlin (LCB) with the aim of making available new books from countries and regions which were behind the Iron Curtain until 1989 and now dwell on the fringe of Germany's public interest (e.g., Albania, Latvia, and Slovakia). This program subsidizes about fifteen translations of contemporary prose, poetry, and drama per year. Altogether, 251 titles were subsidized from 1993 to 2009.

The choice of these two translation subsidy programs for analysis is based on several factors. First, both programs can be regarded as examples of the political will to support translations from specific literatures. Or, put another way, "as the politico-cultural response to the relative economic weakness of the niche market" (Kessel 429) – the segment of the book market that enables marginalized literatures to reach German-speaking readers. Second, necessary financial resources are made available for their purposes by the state: in this case the Federal Foreign Office of Germany (*Auswärtiges Amt*) and the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. The maximum possible subsidy amount can be up to 90% of the total cost of translation. Third, with regard to divisions between the northern and southern hemispheres and between western and eastern Europe, both subsidy programs touch upon the issues of cultural domination and the asymmetric circulation of works for translation. They claim to operate as a

counterbalance to the lack of literary recognition and asymmetric translation patterns. Samples of works subsidized by these programs (more than 800 titles) offer a useful base for examining the potential for state institutions to modify the translation pattern within the international translation system. The interesting questions are what the impact of these subsidy programs on the asymmetric pattern of translations is, and how different the languages represented by the subsidy program's agenda are. To answer these questions, I refer to three crucial aspects.

Initial findings and discussion

The proportion of subsidized translated works among all translations and all literary fiction translations published in Germany

Forty-five works per year, on average, were supported by both subsidy programs between 1998 and 2008. The percentage of works subsidized by litprom and LCB averages 0.67% of all translations published in Germany and 0.76% of all translations of works of fiction within that period. The subsidies' impact is marginal when compared to the number of all translations published. In Germany, literary production in peripheral languages from cultural areas with little capital remains marginal.

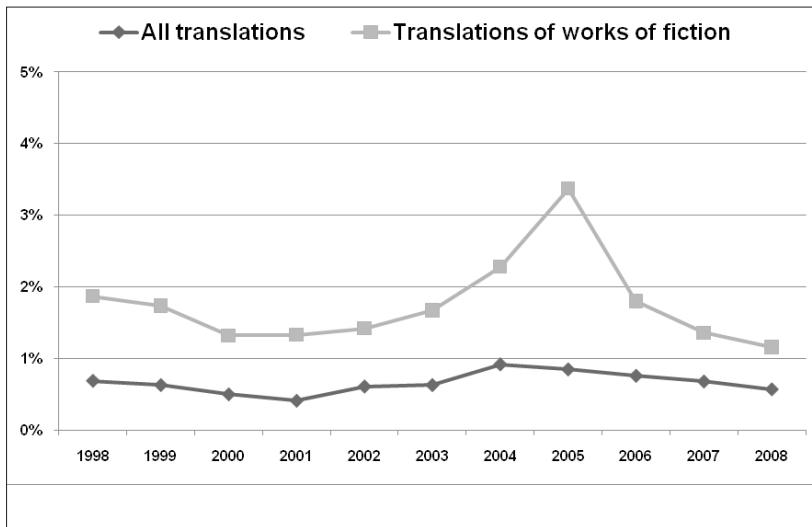


Figure 3: Proportion of subsidized translations by litprom and LCB among all translations / all translations of literary fiction, 1998–2008

The diversity of languages of origin involved in the subsidy programs

Works of fiction from thirty-nine different languages have been subsidized since the programs started in 1984 and 1993, respectively.⁹ By preparing a *List of Top 5 Languages of Origin* within the two subsidy programs, a strong focus on certain languages and language groups can be recognized. Among the titles supported by litprom: Spanish (28%), English (23%), Arabic (17%), French (13%), and Chinese and Portuguese (both 4%) are the most frequent source languages. The proportion of these top-ranking languages represents 89% of the program's subsidized translations.¹⁰ Similarly the proportions of the most frequent languages subsidized by LCB are Russian (40%), Polish (16%), languages of southeastern Europe including Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Macedonian (10%), Hungarian (9%), and Czech (8%); these account for 83% of the program's chosen source languages.¹¹ By focusing on the small number of languages that dominate the lists of subsidized works, an analogy can be drawn to describe how languages of origin are chosen for literary translations on the German book market. Translation subsidy programs fail to counterbalance the increasing prominence of English as the source language for translations into German.

The proportion of subsidized translated works from a specific language among all literary translations from this language

Comparing the number of all literary translations with the number of only subsidized translations from a specific language, the following holds true for Russian, Polish, and Hungarian: from 1998 to 2008, the percentage of LCB subsidized works from these languages represents more than 10% of all literary translations published from those languages. 11.6% of all literary translations from Russian were subsidized, 14.1% of all Polish titles, and 17.4% of all Hungarian titles. The contribution of subsidy programs to translations from specific languages into German can therefore be considered statistically significant: they participate in forming a repertoire of works translated into German. Additionally, the number of literary translations from all three languages increased strongly when the country had guest-of-honor status at the Frankfurt Book Fair. At different times, the share of subsidized translations among all literary translations from these three languages reached its peak. In 2003, the share of subsidized literary translations from Russian rose to 15% of all published literary translations from Russian. In 2000, the share from Polish increased to

almost 30% of all literary translations from Polish. Hungary's participation as guest-of-honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1999 led to an increase in its share of subsidized literary translations to over 85%.

A similar observation can be made in the case of Arabic. In 2004,¹² when the Arabic-speaking world was guest-of-honor in Frankfurt, thirty-five translations (among them eighteen works of fiction) from Arabic were published in Germany. Litprom subsidized thirteen literary translations from Arabic in 2004, approximately twice as many as in previous years. The share of subsidized literary translations from Arabic rose to 72% of all translations of works of fiction from Arabic published that year. These findings demonstrate how the economy and international commercial events such as book fairs affect the book and translation market and translation subsidy programs that operate in favor of literary imports. Within the limits of the few parameters examined, these two examples of German subsidy programs can only serve as indicators of this tendency.

To sum up, against the background of international translation patterns a discrepancy can be observed in terms of the self-descriptions of the translation subsidy programs and their actual impact on the asymmetric circulation of translations. It has become almost commonplace to praise subsidy programs for securing the presence of or sustaining marginalized literatures in translations on the German book market. Nonetheless, this analysis has shown that subsidies' potential to modify the hierarchical order underlying international literary exchange is still very limited – both in terms of the quantitative proportion as well as the diversity of source languages for translations. The power imbalance and the unequal prestige of languages and literatures decisively determine how much is being translated as well as which translation flows are preferred. Finally, seen from the perspective of German as a target language for translations, one can ask whether subsidy programs actually reinforce the role of German as one of the central languages within the international circulation of translations even though they claim to broaden the appreciation of marginalized literatures. A further and more detailed study could therefore verify whether and to what extent German subsidy programs indirectly support the role of German as a vehicular language intermediating between literatures from the periphery and semi-periphery that benefits from this kind of “transit trade” (Heilbron 437) on the global translation market.

NOTES

¹ The reference to Fischer can be found in Wolf (“Dem Publikum”).

² The French version of the article was published in 1999 (Bourdieu, “Une révolution”). As Bourdieu states, the literary or publishing field that makes itself part of the decision-making process regarding literature is like any other field of cultural production structured around opposition to large- and small-scale circulation. Having short-term economic gains and finding a large audience rule the subfield of large-scale production. With regard to literary translations, the drive of the market leads to the publication of successful international bestsellers translated mainly from English. Aesthetic criteria and innovation value are at stake in the subfield of restricted production, where publishers are more qualified in their role as discoverers of works from small languages. Although “accepting the risk inherent in cultural investment” (Poupaud 39), these publishers have a long production cycle and orient their production of translated titles towards hypothetical future profits. Bourdieu’s article clearly argues “against the commercial constraints that are increasingly imposed on publishers in the wake of growing concentration around large groups. [...] These constraints [...] threaten the autonomy of the literary field” (Sapiro, “Translation” 155). According to Bourdieu, the potential for resistance to market forces and the standardization of literary production can be found within the subfield of restricted production. It is a matter of small, independent publishers with a coherent translation policy that refuse to treat literary translation simply as a commodity or commercial investment. In conclusion, Bourdieu stresses the importance of the “advocates” that support the role of small-scale circulation. Nevertheless, according to his critical observation, state funding in France usually goes to publishing companies that dispose of massive capital – both economic and symbolic.

³ For the purpose of my analysis, I focus on the first aspect suggested by Heilbron and Sapiro. In this way, I can link the role of translation subsidy programs in Germany to international literary exchange.

⁴ In their research on literary prizes, Dücker and Neumann connect this agency with the authority to determine what is considered a valuable cultural product. This observation can also be applied to other areas and subsidy measures.

⁵ To describe the translation market as being embedded in both the international book market and in relations between countries, Sapiro suggests combining Bourdieu’s field theory and his theory of economy of symbolic goods with Heilbron’s center-periphery model (see Sapiro, “Translation”; Heilbron). From the standpoint of literary exchange, Pascale Casanova’s notion of “translation as unequal exchange” based on the asymmetric distribution of linguistic and literary capital among different countries and their literatures also contributes to the understanding of translation patterns as the background to national power struggles (see “Consécration” and *The World*).

⁶ According to Heilbron, English is the hyper-central language, and the central languages are German and French (and Russian). All other languages can be regarded as semi-peripheral and peripheral languages. The position in the world translation system, or the centrality of a language, depends on its share of the total number of translated books worldwide. The number of native speakers and the size of language groups are not determining factors.

⁷ For data on the current situation of translations into German see Kessel. Schalke and Gerlach analyze the literary translation sector in Germany with regard to the strategies publishers use. Stock’s article deals with the relevance of translations for literary import and export in Germany.

⁸ In 2008, the *Top 20 List of Languages of Origin for Translations into German* featured the following languages: English (66.9%), French (11.5%), Italian (2.9%), Spanish (2.6%),

Dutch (2.3%), Swedish (2%), Russian (1.8%), Japanese (1.4%), Turkish (1.2%), Norwegian (0.8%), Finnish (0.7%), Polish (0.6%), Hebrew and Danish (both 0.5%), Latin, Australian English, Hungarian, Chinese, and Croatian (all 0.4%), and Arabic (0.3%).

⁹ Russian is represented by both subsidy programs. Ten of the languages used as sources within both subsidy programs were listed in the *Top 20 List of Languages of Origin for Translations into German* in 2008: English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Croatian.

¹⁰ Within the Program of Translation Subsidies, operated by litprom, other languages of origin in the sample of subsidized works are represented as follows: Persian and Bahasa Indonesia (both 3%), other languages together 5% (Afrikaans, Farsi, Hindi/Urdu, Khmer/Cambodian, Kiswahili, Korean, Marathi, Russian, Quechua, Turkish, and Vietnamese).

¹¹ Within the Program for Promotion of Translation from Central and Eastern Europe, operated by LCB, other languages of origin in the sample of subsidized works are represented as follows: Albanian (4%), Romanian and Ukrainian (both 3%), and other languages together 6% (Bulgarian, Belarusian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Slovak, Slovenian, and Yiddish).

¹² In 2004, Arabic ranked twelfth in the *Top 20 List of Languages of Origin for Translations into German*.

DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSLATION STATISTICS

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