

## SMALL LANGUAGE MEANS SMALL MARKET

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As much as we are trying we are unable to find some really *substantial* differences between the so-called big and small languages in terms of lexical richness, stylistic structure or possibilities of expression. Of course we can find some divisions but they are located in other places. The real differences exist rather between the languages of the various groups and/or between the predominantly agglutinative or predominantly inflexional languages. The simple fact telling us how much people are using this or that language is not determinative.

Unless I am very much mistaken I find it reasonable enough to state as a starting point of my lecture that we shall not look for the real differences between the big and small languages in the linguistic field – and that any substantial differences are mostly cultural, social and most of all economical.

First of all I would like to say that the conditions of the translator and publisher in a small language will never be excellent. And I am also sure that it should be not our aim to achieve these excellent conditions, a lot of finance from the state a nothing to worry about. I believe that a little bit of suffering and oppression is just the right thing every artist needs to create (and I hope we are at least half-artists, since most of the theory is placing the literary translation somewhere in a twilight zone between

interpretative and creative arts). But even so we will all probably agree that some improvement, and in some cases even a substantial improvement is highly desirable. In my short essay I would like to express my opinions about how our situation could improve, either by our work or by some external, social, economical or technological development. I will logically start with the data most at hand, with the situation in our country. The Czech language with ten million native speakers can be considered as lying somewhere near the higher limits of what we call „small language“. Obviously, what they call in the business and marketing field „the target group“, i.e. in our case all the active readers and book-buyers, is considerably smaller. If we exclude all the babies under five years, all the people whose literacy looks good only in a national statistics and most of all the mass of people who are simply not interested in reading, it is an educated guess that our audience in a ten million nation is under two million.

Another important datum is a number of books published per year. In a case of Czech Republic, at least in the last few years, it is approximately 12 000 books per year. Again we can exclude some publications because of their character: we can not seriously call any computer software manual a book. But surely some 10 000 publications **do** deserve this proud name.

These figures can be perceived as a good starting point, if we are attempting to think about our situation, about our

(or any) possibilities of changing it and about the future development.

Obviously, we can not change the social and economical conditions, we can only observe the changes, maybe try to anticipate them and surely try to take advantage of them. To this part of the problem I will pay attention in a due time but first I would like to concentrate on the smaller part of the problem, i.e. what can be done by the translators and publishers.

About 35 % of the books published in Czech language are translated from a foreign language. If we consider again that any year some 85 % is translated from English, we have 3 000 books translated from English. We can calculate: how many good translators from English we need in a country of our size? Let us be desperately optimistic and suppose that an average literary translator is able to translate 1 500 standard pages per year and that one average book has only 300 pages. With one translator making five books per year we still need six hundred excellent translators from English. Even if we all know that in reality we need much, maybe twice more, and even if we ignored the whole huge mass of translations for televisions, movies, theatres, video and so on, the question stays the same: can we find six hundred excellent translators from English in a nation of ten million people? I don't think so and the results of our anti-awards are very conclusive in these matters. My opinion is that the publishers and the translators should be very careful in their choice and not overburden the readers. Surely it is very hard to do in a free society

but even a little turn towards a bigger publishers' sobriety could improve the things. In Czech republic we have some publishers (and I don't speak about the big houses who are increasing their production simply from economic reasons, but about the publishing houses producing a quality fiction) who are showing exactly this damaging voracity. One of them was some years ago publishing at least 150 titles with a one-women editorial office and a loose nebula of external authors and editors whom they were unable to control. The result was that every year this publishing house was listed simultaneously between the publishers aspiring for the award for the best translation and for the anti-award, producing in the same time the jewels of translation and some incredible horrors. It took us three years to persuade them that a smaller amount of production will be better for all. Now the situation is better but other similar, if smaller publishers are still making this mistake.

Other possibility lies in my view in a change of our intellectual prejudices towards the trivial literature and in subsequent change in the literary education. I fear that we are making enormous mistake by thinking that Mrs. J. K. Rowling and Ian McEwan are living in two completely different universes. I suppose even James Joyce started reading some pulp magazine with boys' adventures. From these incredible millions of Harry Potter readers we will probably have some future McEwans. The strategists of our education systems should stop forcing the not yet mature boys and girls to think that the literature is something

very distant and alien to their minds. The education system should accept the trivial literature not as something of a lesser value but as a first step towards a more valuable literature.

In a similar way we should probably effectuate some pressure on our authorities to include into all the schools' curriculum a subject called „the creative writing“. The creative writing is not necessarily focused on literature, but it creates a useful psychological effect: many of the people who were learning how to write will be simply interested how the others, in this case the writers, are doing it.

We could be probably able to find many other methods how to improve our situation, but even so our chances are limited. On the other hand the passive side of the problem, the observation and/or anticipation of social, economical and technological changes with some impact on book publishing in small languages, opens a virtually infinite field for speculation.

The future development is always uncertain but we can at least concentrate on some firm points. For example we can take for sure that the stronghold of reading is located in the middle classes. This means that our strive runs parallel with the progress in western culture, because the political and social well-being depends strongly on creating a numerous and satisfied middle class. It is also in our best interests to increase a number of people with the highest level of education. For example in the so-called transforming economics of the post-communist part of

Europe the teachers and the doctors are chronically underpaid. If this group could leave this social impasse and assume their normal „western“ position in the upper middle or higher classes, it could be a real blessing for our book market.

Most of the literary translators are humanities-educated and not at very friendly terms with what we call the hard sciences. Therefore it will maybe surprise you that I am placing my biggest hope for the future in the new technologies. As a part-time specialist on science-fiction literature I can tell you that the humanity came a long way from the scientific enthusiasm and now an almost exaggerated fear of science is ruling – we call it the Frankenstein complex. But one thing is to know the dangers of science and another is to be realistic. We came to the point where we certainly could use some of the initial sense of wonder since many incredible new things are awaiting us. And I hope sincerely this will be true also when we are talking about any technologies concerning the printed word. I really don't care if the change will occur in classical printing methods or in digital printing or if an altogether new principle will emerge. But I feel we are desperately in need of this change.

We are and we probably forever will be dealing with the small print runs. There is no way to escape this if the human beings will stay the same they are now. And from economical point of view, the problem with the small print runs is that it increases enormously the printing costs. The record industry is facing very different problems than

the book market because the structure of costs is different. They are struggling rather with the authors royalties, publicity and marketing and distribution costs. The direct production costs are not so important because the difference is not so critical if you are producing ten thousand or five hundreds CDs. But if you are printing five hundred books instead of ten thousand, the difference in the printing costs per one book is not big, but murderous. That is exactly where I am placing my hope for some new technology. If we will be able to do the small print runs with the printing costs per one book not so absurdly different from a big print run, our situation will dramatically improve.

We can also perceive some beneficial side effects. With a possible improved digital printing of the future, the printed book will be not our final station. If we will realise that we made some mistake, even if the publisher produced some copies, we can correct the mistake in the rest of the print run without any additive costs.

At the end of my short essay I have one good and one bad news for you. The bad news is that anybody who will be brave enough to work as a literary translator, will be suffering regardless of any positive changes of the future. The good news is that his suffering will be radically different and probably much better than a suffering of a bank manager. And the best news is that in my opinion we had also some good prospects. If our society will be relatively morally, socially and economically healthy, if at least twenty percent of our fellow-citizens will be of a

cultured, educated kind with some taste, and if our expectations for a new wondrous technologies will become reality even from one tenth, then our suffering will be definitely a small one, as our language is.

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