

Literal Interpretation

Don Bartlett on how translators successfully stood together against publishers (*with thanks to Bjørn Herrman for his kind advice*)

Put British literary translators together and you may well hear the conversation alternating between enthusiastic descriptions of books they have read and earnest discussion of widely different contracts, fees, terms and conditions. United we may be in our love of good books but we are definitely divided in terms of the diversity of working conditions and experiences. So it comes as refreshing news to hear that there is such a thing as a standard fee and a nationally unified association of translators. It is also intriguing that they can go on strike. How can freelancers go on strike? Surely they can't?



Well, they can if they are creative thinkers and Norwegian. Most, but not all, translators in Norway belong to one of two organisations, either NO for literary translation or NFF for non-fiction, or both. From 1972 all Norwegian translators had an agreement with the Publishers' Association about fees. It was strictly the same fee for all, whatever the text (although it was meant to vary according to

degree of difficulty) and it rose in line with the consumer price index. Sounds vaguely reassuring, but translation as a consumer item? Why not link it to a wage index? The consumer price index can be distorted by imports from developing countries and it isn't long before fees are out of line with salaries earned in other employment. And that was what happened. According to NO and NFF, in 1991 translators needed to translate 1,056 pages in order to produce an average annual salary, while in 2000 translators had to translate 1,323 pages at a rate of 142 Norwegian kroner (approx. £12) a page to achieve the same. In 2006 the rate was 203 kroner (approx. £17), but translators were now forced to translate 1,723 pages a year not to lag behind. This clearly wasn't such a good system. The translation associations wanted the fee to rise to 244 kroner (approx. £20.50) per page and publishers to bring an end to the system of fees tracking the consumer price index. Translators weren't Chinese footwear or Chilean apples, as they put it. The Publishers' Association refused to go above 208 kroner and accordingly on 1st April of this year negotiations broke down. With a total membership of 790 translators NO and NFF (plus some non-unionised sympathisers) went on strike, or, to be more precise, they didn't stop working, they worked to rule.

The 1972 agreement stipulated that translators had to hand in "easily readable, typewritten manuscripts which were ready to print". So this is what they did. They



meticulously followed an out-dated practice to go with an out-dated payment agreement. Manuscripts were neatly tied up in packages and delivered to the publishers, who then had to scan in the documents and print them out in order for them to be edited. Editors who were quick off the mark and used to scrawling in margins and between lines soon found scanning in these comments was not so easy. As the stand-off continued,

manuscripts piled up: 60 in May, 200 by August.

To make the point even more emphatically, translators demonstrated in the small square between the bare façade of the Gyldendal publishing house in Oslo -

while the rest was being rebuilt and refurbished – and the Aschehoug building, another leading publisher. Translators sat behind wooden tables banging out letters on ancient typewriters to accompany their translations while journalists took photographs and garnered information for a report. The image of a company modernising its premises but assigning its freelance translators to the past needed little comment. And



this action was the witty hallmark of a campaign which was launched on posters, placards, brochures, sandwich boards, web sites and in the media.

In the press the debate raged.

Freelance translators said they had no guarantees of work and if they did have full-time work they were obliged to work long hours to earn well under the average annual salary of a Norwegian employee (approx. £18,000 as opposed to £30,000). A graph

illustrated the way their earnings had fallen away. Publishers maintained fees should reflect what the Norwegian publishing industry could tolerate. After all, translators had a variety of sources of income: the book club, fees from recordings of their material and so on. They should not consider themselves comparable with normal wage earners. Furthermore, translations were not money-spinners. They usually only sold between 200-600 copies, over 1,000 if they were extremely lucky. Indeed, look how the translation of Chomsky had fared. Norwegian translators, said the publishers, were the best paid in Europe whilst *they*, on the other hand, were being pressed from all sides: by agents, writers, booksellers, etc. In response, translators asked how many translations had actually been adopted by the book club or featured on the radio, and why it was that no figures regarding sales of translations and income were ever published. Didn't the government financially support translations and what about the copies libraries bought? And so it rumbled on.

Publishers responded to the translators' action by suspending a "diskette fee" and NO/NFF dug into the campaign coffers to ensure that translators were covered for losses and stayed united. Months passed, throughout which Oddrun Remvik, the head of the action committee, conducted a very relaxed, good-humoured campaign targeting literary festivals, publishing house parties and open events, collecting signatures and raising funds. She made it clear that translators did not want to whinge but to show the kind of creativity that was inherent to their work. After three months of this work-to-rule, activists distributed collectable Pokémon-style cards with a photo of publishing industry honchos and a bite-size quotation between speech marks. After four months of deadlock, the chairman of the Publishers' Association, Geir Berdahl, was quoted as saying: "We need time to think constructively about how we can solve this." Cards with photos of leading figures who had responded with silence bore speech marks, but nothing between them. The cards were displayed on the strike website and constituted part of an internet game.

Translators took family and friends along to picket publishers' parties and events, where there was a carnival-like atmosphere, reflected in the selection of light-hearted and serious slogans on home-made placards, such as: "Recent research has revealed that translators need more money now," "You are drinking the blood, sweat and tears of translators. And what's on your plate?" "Have you the heart/wallet to go to this party, too?", "Writers create national literature with their language, translators

create world literature” and “Enough is enough. Our fees have been tied to the consumer price index. It’s 7 years since we cancelled that agreement.”

On 29th September agreement was finally reached, the basic fee per page was increased to 233 kroner (approx. £19.50) and the link with the consumer price index was dropped in favour of the wage index. It may not have been as much as the two associations had hoped for, but it did ensure that their pay would not be pegged back in the way it had been before.

In Norway, over an 18-month period, there were 2,180 books translated from English alone, and many more from other languages. Look at the situation here – bearing in mind that Norwegian literature is flying high at the moment - and the number of literary translations is minuscule. This huge imbalance is unfortunately nothing new, nor is it confined to smaller countries like Norway, but it is indicative of the different situations British and other European translators find themselves in. Only 2-3% of all publications in the UK area translations, a desperately low figure, and of course that limits how much work is open to a substantial group of potential translators. There is real competition for the translation projects available and publishers are not held by any agreement to a particular rate. While some companies do voluntarily observe the Translators’ Association’s recommended minimum fee (now £80 per thousand words) and have been known to offer above the going rate, others have a tight in-house budget for a particular book and tie the translator down to a lower fee. Competitive fee-setting and the relative paucity of translation jobs mean necessarily that most literary translators must have a variety of sources of income.

Despite the differences between the English and Norwegian situations, we can recognise all too clearly many of the arguments used on both sides of the above-mentioned dispute. Publishing in Norway is also a commercial enterprise and so obviously we have issues in common. Norwegian translators have set us an example and shown us what can be achieved with a concerted effort. The Translators’ Association currently numbers around 450 members. Could we not benefit from a larger union membership and greater solidarity?

For further details about the Norwegian translators’ campaign, go to www.oversetteraksjonen.no

