LITERARY TRANSLATION FROM ARABIC INTO ENGLISH
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND IRELAND, 1990-2010

a report prepared by **Alexandra Büchler** and **Alice Guthrie**

with research assistants **Barbora Černá** and **Michal Karas**

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LITERATURE ACROSS FRONTIERS

1   Executive Summary

This report was written at a time when most organisations promoting literature and supporting literary translation across Europe are experiencing cuts to their already inadequate budgets. This presents an immediate threat to literary translation, which depends largely on public and private subsidies. Yet, the need for translation between languages and cultures, particularly between Europe and its neighbouring regions, and in particular the Arab world, has never been greater. It is clear that we need to develop new and innovative approaches to argue the case for the key role of culture, including literary translation, in contributing to intercultural understanding, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in the wider Euro-Mediterranean region.

1.1   Framework

The report is the result of a study of literary translation into English in the United Kingdom and Ireland from the three major official languages of the South-East Mediterranean region — Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish. It was conducted as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Translation Programme, a cooperation between the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, Literature Across Frontiers and Transeuropéennes, and specifically as part of the mapping of translation in the region coordinated by Transeuropéennes throughout 2010 and 2011.

1.2   Method and scope

The study covers the period from 1990 until 2010 and examines the entire context in which literary translation takes place. It is therefore based not only on an assessment of published titles, but on a survey of the whole literary scene, including the culture of live literary events at festivals and venues, the media reception of translated literature, training opportunities and support structures relevant to literary translators, as well as the policies of key arts bodies, and financial support provided by public and private sources. Much of the gathered information comes from relevant websites and printed material (including book reviews and critical articles), as well as from a number of interviews conducted for the report with individual publishers, authors and translators, arts and culture bodies, book and literature organisations, and literary venues and festivals.

The Euro-Mediterranean scope of the mapping project means that the study had to be limited to the British Isles; however, the interconnected nature of the British and North American book market is noted, and the bibliography on which the study draws — based on the British National Bibliography database — includes all publications available in the British Isles, some of which may be US co-editions. It would be very useful to extend the study in the future to cover North America, and possibly all English-language territories, to obtain a more complete picture of translation from Arabic into English.

The study focuses on translation into English, and does not take into consideration autochthonous minority languages spoken in the British Isles — Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Scots and Welsh. Apart from the few

exceptions of individual translations produced as part of a project or for a festival hosting authors from Arab countries, we have found no evidence of translations into these languages.

1.3 Findings

1.3.1 Literature translated from Arabic — volume and trends

Translation of modern and contemporary literature from Arabic is a relatively recent phenomenon, but an increased interest in Arab writing and culture in general has been the strongest observed trend. Of key importance among initiatives aiming to give Arabic literature greater visibility is the London-based *Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* and projects such as *Beirut39* organised by the Hay Festival, while London's *Dash Arts Arabic series* or the *Arabic Arts Festival* in Liverpool and London introduce the arts and culture of the Arab world in a wider sense.

The number of literary translations published over the period covered by the study (310 in total) doubled in the second decade, and especially in the second half of it. While in the first years of the 1990s the average number of published translations was between two and eight per year, in the 2000s the average rose to between ten and sixteen, with twenty-six translations from Arabic published in 2009.

Yet, the study concludes that there are still not enough translations published from Arabic, and that, with some exceptions, interest in books coming from the Arab world is determined by socio-political factors rather than by the desire to explore the literary culture of the Middle East and North Africa for its own merits. This means that books from this region are often approached primarily as a source of socio-political commentary or documentary, rather than as literary works per se.

It seems to be mainly extra-literary factors that make publishers take an interest in books from the region. In the case of Arabic literature, we have witnessed a sharp rise in interest in the Arab and Muslim world following the events of 9/11. Despite this, translation from Arabic largely remains the preserve of specialised publishers.

1.3.2 Need for reliable data on published translations

Embarking on the study, the authors were faced with a major problem: the lack of an existing bibliography of translated works. While data on published books in general are available through the British National Bibliography and Nielsen BookData (at a cost by the latter), there is no systematic collection of data or statistical analysis of translations published and distributed in the UK and Ireland. The *Index Translationum*, the global UNESCO database of translations, only started receiving and processing data from the British National Bibliography very recently and still presents an uneven and unreliable picture of translations into English.

The authors therefore had to compile their own bibliography before they could assess trends in the publishing of literary translations from Arabic. In addition, it has not been possible to conclusively compare publication figures with data from other countries on the one hand, and with translations from

other languages into English on the other. A random check of *Index Translationum* data for 2005 suggests that translations from Arabic are relatively fewer than translations into English from other foreign languages, ranging from Chinese and Japanese to Scandinavian languages, and certainly far below the leading source languages French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian.

The need for a reliable mechanism to collect and analyse data on translated books is therefore one of the most urgent issues to have emerged from this and other studies and surveys, including those conducted by Literature Across Frontiers.[1]

1.3.3   Need for a comprehensive resource on translation matters in the United Kingdom and Ireland

Currently, there are several organisations dealing with translation which provide some information, but none of them offers a comprehensive coverage of this field in the United Kingdom and Ireland comparable to, for example, the Three Percent website in the United States.[2] There is therefore the need for a comprehensive resource on translation matters in the United Kingdom and Ireland that would connect existing information sources and channel relevant information and news from abroad.

1.3.4   Translators, translator training, work conditions and quality control

While there are a number of translators working from Arabic, the vast majority have received no specialised literary translation training, although literary translation training for Arabists is becoming available in the framework of some university courses. It is widely acknowledged that translation studies courses do not necessarily produce literary translators; it appears that short-term training and skills development opportunities, such as summer schools, seminars, workshops and mentoring schemes would be the best options to offer those who might wish to become literary translators, or have already started publishing translations from these languages. Examples of best practice are given in the individual studies, but such initiatives are costly and require substantial subsidies.

Literary translators from Arabic rely on other sources of income and literary translation is not seen as a viable career choice among students and graduates, with a main career required alongside translation in order to earn a living. On the other hand, the connection between the academe and literary translation is relatively strong and many literary translators mentioned and interviewed here are academics. Paradoxically, translation practice is not accorded academic and research credit, something that is seen as a serious problem both in Britain and the US.

The demographic of the translator population has begun to shift during the last few years of the period in question, most notably in terms of gender, age and mother tongue — many non-native Anglophone translators are now being published. There is much optimism in the Arabic literary translation scene about this new diversity of voices and the subtly accurate versions of contemporary writing they can render.

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[1] See *Publishing Translations in Europe, Trends 1990-2005*, Literature Across Frontiers, 2010. Available in pdf at www.lafpublications.org and *Research into Barriers to Translation and Best Practices*, conducted by Dalkey Archive Press for the Global Translation Initiative, March 2011, available in pdf at www.dalkeyarchive.com.
[2] http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent

However, this new generation of translators includes individuals who are not from the privileged educational background traditionally associated with the field, and therefore its professional development needs to be supported by the various measures mentioned in the recommendations section of this study.

Translation quality monitoring and assurance is another issue that comes up repeatedly with regard to Arabic-to-English translation. Publishing houses generally do not have the required expertise to assess translations from these languages or to offer editorial input, leaving translations without sufficient additional editing. There is also frequently a lack of professional editing of the original Arabic published text, which needs to be addressed. Measures to upgrade editorial care on the part of publishers and create a more robust critical review culture for translations from Arabic, which engages with the quality of translations, are therefore crucial to improving the quality of published translations.

1.3.5   Publishing, marketing of books and support for translation

The study concludes that there is a need to establish a better coordinated system of support for the entire process, from the selection of titles, to translation quality monitoring, editing and marketing of books, starting with the provision of selective and high quality information on titles and authors to publishers based in the British Isles and Ireland. Given that publication into English is seen as being key to further international dissemination, a concentrated effort should be made to provide such information to publishers, and to support it by translation and marketing funds.

A key problem identified by many respondents is the fact that the Arab world has done very little to promote its own writing internationally and even less to support its translation. Before the changes that have swept through the Arab world while this report was in the making, it was understood that many Arab writers would in fact prefer not to be internationally associated with the ruling regimes of the region, particularly repressive states where censorship and government control of publishing was rife. It remains to be seen what changes the Arab uprisings will bring in this regard, but it is unlikely that resources will be made available for the international promotion of culture and for translation in the short term, whether at pan-Arab or national level.

The lack of funding for translation from Arabic in particular is seen as a key obstacle to the dissemination of Arabic writing abroad, and the burden of funding inbound translation from Arabic and its marketing has so far been carried by British arts funding authorities. At the same time, a coordinated pan-Arab initiative is currently difficult to envisage for many reasons, and an initiative involving a raft of measures, based in the UK and drawing on the expertise of Arabists and native speakers alike, is seen as the most realistic way forward.

1.3.6   The role of the media

The study concludes that the British Isles lack the degree of audio-visual media coverage which books and literature receive in other countries, and, with some negligible exceptions, television and radio almost never deal with literature in translation. As for press coverage, very little space is offered to translations in review sections of national papers and literary magazines. Reviews of translations from Arabic are no

exception, with well-informed, in-depth reviews written by cultural and literary journalists familiar with the language and cultural context being extremely rare. Serious critical assessment of literary translation from Arabic is therefore missing or is restricted to academic journals, and this in turn has implications for setting translation quality standards.

1.3.7   Literary exchange and mobility — the broader picture

Literary exchange and intercultural dialogue being the desired state of affairs — as opposed to a one-way translation traffic, which is generally the case where English is the source and target language — we need to take a look at the bigger picture. While translation from English is notoriously high, representing around 50% or more of translations in most European countries, translation of quality titles and new writing, including neglected genres such as poetry, is relatively low. In other words, the "commercial imperative" is at work on both sides, and a concentrated effort on the part of public bodies supporting arts activities is needed to encourage and foster exchanges, which in turn contribute to the creation of an environment receptive to dialogue between cultures, with all that it entails beyond the translation and publication of books.

Secondly, exchange and dialogue also involves immigrant communities, including resident authors who have settled in the UK and Ireland but continue writing in their native language. This is the case particularly with Arab authors who are often not considered to be part of the local literary scene, and do not benefit from public support, whether for the creation of new work or to have their work translated into English.

Thirdly, the mobility of translators, authors, editors, publishers, festival and venue programmers and other professionals is key to ensuring continued literary exchange, but is extremely limited between the UK and the region in focus. Both outbound and inbound mobility funding is scarce and may be tied to one-off initiatives (for instance a visit organised by the British Council or one of the Arts Councils). Festivals and venues have to depend on foreign sources when they wish to bring authors from abroad, and unlike many other European countries, the UK has few residential facilities for foreign authors (including authors persecuted by the regime of their country), or opportunities for translators from abroad. Likewise, opportunities for literary exchange combined with translation skills development are sometimes offered within the framework of individual projects, but opportunities comparable to those offered by the translators' and writers' houses in other European countries, and notably in Belgium, France and German-speaking countries, are still missing.

On the whole, the study concludes that provision for literary exchange and mobility in the British Isles is largely insufficient, and that independent organisations are not given the incentives and support necessary to plan ambitious international projects and offer opportunities to professionals, both local and from abroad.

1.4 Main conclusions

1.4.1 In-depth study of the current environment

The recent changes in literary translation infrastructure, the re-structuring of the arts funding system in 2010-2011, and the increased interest in translation and international content, especially in England, all call for an in-depth study of the current environment in which literary translation exists. This study, combined with a detailed analysis of potential multi-stakeholder best practice, would chart the way forward, and create international opportunities allowing sustained, on-going and fruitful cooperation and exchange.

1.4.2 Key role of subsidies

The report identifies the instrumental role played by international exchange and the mobility of writers and translators in creating an environment which simultaneously generates more translations of high quality and is more receptive to them. A central conclusion of this report is that the commercial imperative is the main obstacle in the way of better mobility, training, publishing or live literary events in the UK and Ireland; public support and (to a lesser degree) private sponsorship remain the sine qua non of international content. This is despite the fact that commercially successful publishers and festivals are well positioned to take the perceived risks associated with the publishing and promotion of translated literature. Support for independent publishers (who are the mainstay of translated literature in the British Isles) that targets all stages of the publication process, and initiatives aimed at professional and audience development, are essential if international content and literary exchange are to be increased in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

1.4.3 Need for stronger synergies and cooperation strategies

Another main conclusion of the study is that there is a need for stronger synergies and cooperation strategies between the stakeholders — public bodies, private foundations, higher education and the independent arts sector — to deliver, in a sustainable way, the kinds of initiatives identified and highlighted in this study as examples of best practice. Such initiatives have been set up, mostly with public support and mostly in the countries of origin, in the case of translation from Turkish and Hebrew in the East Mediterranean. Translation from Arabic and literary exchange with the Arab world is, however, a far more complex proposition, involving a large and diverse region, and will require correspondingly complex solutions with input from a range of actors and stakeholders.

1.5 Recommendations

1.5.1 A centralised online resource

At present it is difficult to access information about translation matters in general and about translated books and related events in particular. Attempts have been made to establish such an online resource in the past, for example the British Council translation website, with mixed results. Yet, a current, high-quality, comprehensive online resource with relevant links would greatly benefit the overall profile of translated literature and the related sector.

1.5.2   Bibliography and translation statistics

In the absence of a reliable, exhaustive, and easily-accessible bibliography of works in translation by language and country, it is not possible to get a full picture of the history of translation in the British Isles, nor discern trends in translation publishing. There is an urgent need to create a mechanism to collect data on the publishing of translations. In addition, the authors of this report recommend the creation of a database of translated theatre plays, which are not always published in book form.

1.5.3   Translators, training and conditions of work

There is a need to develop a coordinated raft of measures to support translators:

- develop and improve training opportunities, especially in terms of short term training, residencies and mentoring

- improve translators' contractual conditions and remuneration — a role for the Translators' Association

- create support measures complementary to payment offered by publishers (following models and best practices in other countries)

- develop or improve mechanisms for translation quality control and feedback on the standard of published translations, and measures to improve editing practices of both source and target texts by means of internships, training and seminars, and the production of manual-type publications, such as *Translation in Practice: A Symposium,* by Dalkey Archive Press.

An up-to-date, fully detailed contact database of currently active translators (identified by country of origin, so as to assess UK/US questions of translation) needs to be established, not only for the languages currently in question. In the absence of any significant membership of professional associations such as the Translators' Association such information is hard to obtain, except through publisher-by-publisher appeal.

1.5.4   Publishing and the book trade

It is essential to get a better picture of the trade end of publishing in order to ascertain attitudes — and barriers — to the uptake of work in translation by bookshops, libraries and the public, in order to devise marketing and reader development strategies for translated literature. In addition, there is a need to approach and interview sales reps, bookshop buyers, distributors and publicists to get a picture of the attitudes and barriers that exist in that last intervening section of the publishing endeavour between book production and reader. Online retailers such as Amazon or the Book Depository also need to be assessed both in terms of patterns of buying and patterns of related publicity.

1.5.5   Outreach to independent presses

As larger publishers and conglomerates are fairly narrow in their commitments to work in translation, outreach to smaller independent presses is needed in order to achieve the desired diversity identified above. This outcome is best served by promoting foreign titles and literature in translation to smaller

publishers alongside larger ones. These might be publishers with translation lists, or publishers with specialized interests, whether in a region or in particular genres or forms.

1.5.6   E-publishing

The potential of e-publishing for the dissemination of translated literature needs to be assessed, whether in relation to books, internet publishing or the growing influence of literary websites and blogs.

1.5.7   Translation and the media

Review editors in the UK and Ireland are notoriously poor at ensuring adequate space for translation reviews, proper recognition and assessment of translation quality, and even at mentioning translators' names. The time-frame of this report has not allowed an in-depth examination of media coverage of translated work, including mainstream press, radio, television and online material, nor the acquisition of more detailed information on this subject from publishers' publicists and marketing departments. A more thorough assessment of coverage by the media — print, digital and audio-visual — is required, so as to formulate recommendations for measures that would change this culture across the board, under the aegis of the Translators' Association and the Society of Authors, the British Centre for Literary Translation, English PEN and other relevant organisations. Support for workshops and seminars on reviewing, the role of translators as reviewers, and general measures to improve reviewing by the mainstream media are called for, as well as a specialized review publication dedicated to a more detailed analysis, which would improve translation quality as a result of qualified peer review.

1.5.8   Access to work in translation

Libraries are a key component in the delivery and accessibility of work in translation. Although it is known that library budgets have been massively reduced, it has not been possible within the framework of this report to assess the impact of those kinds of cuts on work in translation. Borrowing statistics, acquisitions policy and trends would all reveal useful information, both in terms of supply and demand. Observing public borrowing patterns would also facilitate analysis such as the impact of reviews and festival or media appearances, as reflected in spikes in interest by the reading public. In addition, library borrowing statistics might yield powerful arguments about the interest in translation in support of grant applications that would not be evident in sales.

1.5.9   Ensuring diversity in publishing, and in the programming of festivals, venues and projects

More resources need to be made available to organisations, venues and smaller presses publishing and promoting work in translation in order to ensure that diversity across culture, gender, subject matter, language and genre is achieved in the publishing and promotion of literature in general, and that small, independent presses can effectively compete in a crowded market largely hostile to translation. With respect to Arabic, there is a need to establish more balanced and comprehensive sources of information on new and suitable titles, and to create and make use of contacts between British and Arab publishers and the Arab literary world in general. It is crucial that a broader spectrum of Arab literary experts and professionals be much more widely involved in the recommendation, assessment and selection of material to be translated.

1.5.10 Support for literary exchange and mobility

Resources need to be made available to achieve a more lively and equitable literary exchange, to provide adequate mobility funding for authors, translators and other professionals, and to create more residency opportunities in the UK and Ireland, following international examples of best practice.

1.5.11 Advocacy and funding for translation

Translation into English is a priority, as it provides for onward translation into other languages. New and innovative approaches need to be developed to argue the case for financial support for literary translation — emphasizing its role in the reduction of conflict, cross-cultural dialogue and international relations, for example, in addition to making a case for diversity and access to international culture. This must be done with a view to accessing sources of funds that have not traditionally been available for the arts, literature, publishing or translation — such as charitable foundations, private individuals and innovative sponsorships.