

Programming and Publishing Translation and International Literature

Session Summary

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By Samantha Schnee, Editor *Words Without Borders*

1. **Start early.** Build time to complete a quality translation into your editorial schedule. Depending on the length of the piece and the language of origin, this can vary greatly. Arabic translators, for example, tend to be heavily booked these days and commissioning translation requires planning ahead.
2. **Work with an expert** who knows the literature of the source language well and can recommend specific authors and works if you're not familiar with the literary landscape of a language or country yourself. Advisors can also be good sources for vetting a translation (see #5) and are sometimes even willing to "guest edit" a feature on the literature of their area of expertise.
3. **Begin acquiring rights as soon as you have decided to publish a piece.** The language barrier can slow communications down; it often helps to have someone on staff, even an intern, who speaks the author's (or the author's publisher's) language to facilitate smooth negotiations. Most foreign writers are thrilled by the opportunity to have their work published in English, but this is not always the case and the permissions departments of big publishing houses (especially European ones) are often swamped with requests. Some will request to see a sample before granting rights to a translation (and translators are sometimes willing to do a few hundred words on spec). When all else fails, a meeting at Frankfurt or London bookfair, or a visit to the publisher (if you happen to be in their country) can usually sort out any misunderstanding. Not all countries are party to copyright convention, but it's best to check with a lawyer before proceeding to publish without permission from the author/publisher. You will also need a separate agreement to rights to the translation between you and the translator.
4. **Select a translator with a good track record** with experience in the genre of the piece. PEN and ALTA (American Literary Translators' Association) are a good place to start looking; both have websites and lists of translators. www.WordsWithoutBorders.org is another source that provides samples of translators' work and their bios; use the "search" function to look for translators

from a particular language. The translator should be fluent in (if not a native speaker of) the language into which the piece will be translated; this is less important than perfect fluency in the source language. It is not always possible to find a translator for the more obscure languages (such as Rajasthani, for example) and in these cases it may be best to work with a team of translators with an intermediate language (Hindi, for example) in common. Some translators prefer to work in teams.

5. **Vet a translation sample** if you're working with a translator you haven't worked with before, but make sure the expert selected to vet the piece it is impartial; if they give a negative review of the translation they should not be considered as a candidate for the new translation, this would create a conflict of interest. Diplomacy is crucial to the success of judging the work. There is no single "right" way to complete a translation; do what is best for the piece.
6. **Pay your translators well.** Most translators prefer, when possible to be paid on a per hour basis, however the current industry standard is based on per word rates, with \$100 per 1,000 words deemed fair. Remember to use your translator as a resource if you have any questions about the text; they can often help communicate with the author if necessary, as well. (Translators like to be able to consult with an author on a piece when possible.) For book length publications consider offering an advance against royalties, or fee plus royalties; the translated manuscript is the creative product of the translator as well as the author.
7. **Don't be intimidated by the idea of editing a translation;** it's not that different from editing a text written in English. Keep an eye out for phrases that sound odd to your native speaker's ear that may be too literally translated, but be careful not to edit all the "foreignness" out of a piece either. Ask the translator if you have any questions about word choices they have made or things that may be difficult to translate, such as jokes or puns. When all else fails, a footnote to what is "lost in translation" is permissible.
8. **Be up to date:** Recently the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC, a division of the Treasury) ruled that publication of work from a country under US embargo (such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Sudan, Libya and Cuba) required their permission. This ruling was modified in response to a lawsuit brought against OFAC by the AAP, PEN, and a few others, so it is no longer necessary to obtain specific permission to translate, edit and publish literature from these countries (under the Berman act literature is supposed to be exempt from such rulings). But if considering publication of material from a country listed on the OFAC website, it would be prudent to confirm with a lawyer (or other reliable source, such as PEN) that legislation has not changed.

9. **Be sensitive to politics.** Certain countries, such as North Korea, can be very tricky to obtain literature from, and it is important to recognize that under certain regimes some authors may actually be jeopardized by having work appear in an American publication. They may not even want to be contacted, and certain authors may not want to appear in the same publication as exiled or dissident writers from their country.

10. **Take advantage of cultural institutes and attaches to promote the translation.** Most European nations have cultural councils that sometimes provide financial support for bringing a writer to the US, or connections to possible sponsors for such visits. Less wealthy nations have cultural attaches at their embassies and the UN that can sometimes help obtain funding from private sources and are always a good way to obtain literature from their country, such as copies of literary journals in the source language. Check with American publishers, the Cities of Asylum program, and international writers' colonies (such as Ledig House, NY) to see which authors are in residence or scheduled to visit the US if you're trying to organize an event for international writers with little or no funds for travel. www.WordsWithoutBorders.org maintains a list of writers visiting the US that is updated quarterly