

Diversity Report 2008: Executive summary (English)

Scope and goal of the report

This report compiles and analyses statistics on books in translation across Europe over a period of more than 25 years (1979 to 2005, and in some aspects until 2008) and is based on the UNESCO Index Translationem as well as separate national book market statistics in Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, and Poland.

Data and methodology

Comparisons between the used sets of data show significant inconsistencies in individual numbers, but trends and developments turned out to be fairly representative so that overall patterns, notably flows of translations over time, as well as comparisons between countries and languages, allow a mapping process for the exchange of books by translation in Europe. While translations are certainly not, by themselves, sufficient to measure the status and the changes of cultural diversity (such as defined by the UNESCO declaration of 2001), they are significant indicators for any assessment of cultural diversity.

Findings

The top languages and countries in Europe

English is the clearly predominant original (or source) language for translations whose share grew from 40 to over 60 percent on average within 15 years until hitting apparently a ceiling by the late 1990s. In some countries of Central and Southeast Europe however, the proportion of English is below this threshold by some 10 percent – e.g. in the Czech Republic, Romania or Austria).

English is followed, in a distance, by German and French as the clear number 2 and 3 among the most popular original languages for translations, and the top 3 languages are good, between themselves, for 4 out of 5 translations. Interestingly, despite considerable dynamics of change on many levels, the proportion for the top trio rose only, in a quarter of a century, by slightly less than 10 percent from averages in the low 70s before 1989 to between 80 and 82 percent after that year, and with a decline below 80 percent most recently.

Overall, several indicators hint that translation numbers may have gone down over the past few years, after a long and steady rise, and particularly the top languages lose while a few medium sized languages tend to win, if not in any overwhelming order.

In a ranking of countries, France is likely to be the strongest target country for translations, followed by Germany which used to be the number 1 for decades. In return, only very few translations are done into English, yet we have been cautioned about the reliability of any figures available on this aspect.

There is also a noticeable decline of translations from German into West European countries, e.g. France, Italy, the Netherlands, or Denmark, but also into Czech.

Central and Southeast Europe (CEE)

Specific attention has been paid in this report to Central and Southeast Europe, on translations from these and into these languages as well as between CEE countries. This particular research interest was due to the many languages and different sizes of countries and languages in the region as well as to the desire to gain a more detailed understanding of the impact of a defining political event such as the end of the Cold War and the abolishment of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

In fact, 1989 – and as for Russian, the dissolution of the Sowjet Union in 1991 – can be clearly identified as watersheds in translation trends. Already in the 1980s, the number of translations in the region of CEE started to go down significantly. With the transition, cultural infrastructures crumbled, and only by the late 1990s, translation figures started to rise again, yet cautiously, and never met the high levels from before.

Translation numbers went down, after only a short lived peak of interest in the early 1990s. Recently, translations from major CEE languages (notably Polish, Czech, and Hungarian) into Germany, which used to work as a dynamic cultural gateway for the region, went down again, just as well as translations for France.¹ While old cultural ties between some CEE countries like Poland or Romania are reflected by above average translation numbers from the centres to their peripheries, this is not at all reciprocal.

Only very few other events aside from major political thresholds such as 1989 have an impact that can be tracked in the statistics with a certain likelihood. One exception is the Guest of Honour presentations at the Frankfurt Book Fair of Hungary in 1999 and of Poland in 2000.

The most alarming finding is probably the extremely low – and in comparison to pre-1989 roughly halved – number of intra-CEE translations pointing at a significant loss of cultural exchange through books.

Outlook

In many areas, available data are hardly sufficient (or good enough) for more detailed interpretation, not the least to extract a proper understanding of what seems to indicate at an overall decline in translations for the most recent decade.

It would be highly desirable to have market based statistics aside from the certainly valuable UNESCO data for most countries.

More complex models of data analysis and specifically of how to map culturally diversity should be developed for a better understanding of books and cultural exchanges, which form certainly important elements at the core of culture and identities in Europe.

¹ **Note: The statistics that we could use track numbers for languages into countries, not into languages, which is of significance for languages used in several countries, e.g. France/Belgium, Germany/Austria/Switzerland, Hungary/Romania.**