

THE EMLIT PROJECT

Introduction

“...we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.”

Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”

THE EMLIT PROJECT presents a sample of European Minority Literatures in Translation—literary texts written in a number of European Union countries in minority languages of two types, those of ancient origin within Europe and those associated with more recent migration. They are given here with translations into the five most widely understood European languages—English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The original literary works, in nineteen different minority languages, form the opening section of the book. The rest of the volume is divided into sections presenting translations of all these originals into the five mainstream languages, in the above order. EMLIT’s primary purpose is to support a range of writers, until now known principally to their own language community, and to bring them to a different readership—potentially a huge readership worldwide—but there is also another objective: to hold an unfamiliar mirror up to Europe. These literary texts are a compelling reminder of the cultural diversity which is typical of Europe especially today, and of how easily the different dominant cultures of the mainstream languages can overlook the artistic riches unfolding, in various tongues, in their midst. All the writers are, in a sense, naming what Europe means, in a fresh way, which is why the book’s cover design is based on the word “Europe” in some of the project’s languages. This project has been carried out with the support of the European Community under its Culture 2000 programme.

Universities in five European Union states, under the leadership of Brunel University, London, have worked together on the project, making a selection of texts from writers living in their own countries, and producing a set of translations in their respective national languages. Two universities in Spain, the University of Málaga and the Autonomous University of Barcelona, have collaborated to put forward a body of writing in Galician and Arabic (Málaga), and Catalan, Gun and Amazic (formerly known as Berber) (Barcelona). As well as different parts of Spain, this

brings areas as diverse as West and North Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq into the frame, through European residents with ancestral or personal links to those places. The University of Palermo contributes texts in Sicilian, an ancient language which is still in use, and in Albanian, which is not only the language of many new migrants but has survived in some villages of southern Italy as the language of Albanian communities whose ancestors fled from Turkish persecution in the fifteenth century. From Germany the University of Regensburg offers texts in Sorbian, a Slavic language now confined to two small areas of the east around Cottbus and Bautzen, and also texts in Turkish and Greek from writers whose personal history is a manifest of the post-World War II policy of attracting workers to the former West Germany. The University of Liège in Belgium contributes texts in two regional languages which evolved alongside French—Walloon and Picard—and also writings in Lingala, a language brought to Europe by migrants from Subsaharan Africa, particularly the Congo region. Britain's contribution is divided between texts in two of the ancient Celtic languages of the British Isles, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, and writings in four of the many South Asian languages in use in the UK today: Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Sinhala. Obviously the postcolonial history of the European empires is evident in some of these demographic patterns.

Europe is clearly no one thing, and never has been, with its complex and always changing history of the movement and mingling of peoples, their cultures and their languages. Celtic languages were once spoken throughout the British Isles, for example, but newcomers imposed new languages, out of which English, itself a hybrid, emerged. In some instances a language associated today with relatively recent migration may actually have been in use in the country of arrival for several centuries, as is the case with Arabic in Spain, or Albanian in Italy. It is worth remembering that every minority language is in some sense a majority language too—developing historically as the principal language of a distinct community, and serving still as the main language of a particular group, whether that be as large as the population of Catalunya or as small as a single family, somewhere in Europe, isolated from other speakers of their mother tongue. To help understanding of the specific circumstances, each European minority language represented in the project comes with notes on its social and linguistic position, and for each author there is a short biography.

Clearly, definitions of what constitutes a language—whether a dialect is a language, for instance—and of what constitutes a minority group are recurrent topics of academic discussion. However, for the purposes of this project it will be self-evident that the terms are interpreted broadly. Any language used by a minority in demographic terms (measured against the national population) is here regarded as a minority language. That said, Catalan is clearly in a very different position, socially, from, say, Scottish Gaelic, in terms of numbers of speakers and the prognosis of the language's future. Certain of the “minority” languages in the project, here representing minority communities within Europe, are spoken by huge populations elsewhere. Writers using languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Arabic have a potentially enormous global readership. Other languages in the project are under threat of extinction. Initial plans, in fact, included a language which proved to have already effectively crossed that great divide, Caló in Spain. However, there are also some success stories. Sorbian, for instance, has been brought back from the brink since the 1960s by social policy, with academic support from the University of Leipzig. The situation of a language is never static, and the best strategies to keep a minority's language fully alive, as bilingualism and assimilation become the norm, are still under discussion.

Not surprisingly, some of the works address the question of language itself, and the issues around translation, which, with their practical and philosophical dimensions, are a further subject of academic debate. The relationship between source language and target language is not simple, and there are many strategies of translation. Since secondary translation—or a translation of a translation—clearly raises particular difficulties and potential distortions, it is necessary to point out that this project could not happen without an openness to what might also be gained. We have used every opportunity to consult with the authors—who are often the primary translators—and the fine-tuning of the finished translations has in many cases been a collaborative enterprise.

The project's translations are not, generally, the kind of literary translation which makes free with the original. On the contrary, we have attempted to be as faithful as possible to the tone and form of the original works, while hoping that our translations have literary merit of their own. It has been a challenge to see whether in some of the target languages we could come closer to some of the formal properties of the original than perhaps proved possible in its first translation into a mainstream language. Even faced with an original text in a language whose script a translator does not understand, it is possible to “read” the repeated patterns indicating rhyme, for instance. The rhyme in the poems in Urdu, for example, in the opening section, is visible to the reader with no Urdu, through the repetition of line-end patterns—once it is understood that the Arabic script is written from right to left. Readers are invited not to pass over the book's first section—the originals in all their minority languages—but to open their eyes to how they look, their specificity and different grace on the page. Clearly a translation cannot be the same as the original. The work becomes, in a sense, a new work. There will be some losses, but there may also be some gains. It is hoped that the project may, by juxtaposing with the original works a complete set of translations into the five target languages, invite comparison between the versions, for language students and others, and heighten language awareness.

There has probably never been a collection quite like this before. The EMLIT project brings between the covers of one book a body of work of real substance and great interest, with a wide generic range. There are dramas, comic and serious, prose, including stories and memoirs, and poems of many kinds, including such a revered form as the Urdu ghazal. It was not always easy to choose. For reasons of scale, some material had to be left out of the book, but a slightly extended version of the project is available online in Brunel University's free-access e-journal *EnterText* (www.brunel.ac.uk/faculty/arts/EnterText). Since an integral part of a language's identity is its distinctive music, an introduction to the particular sound of some of EMLIT's languages is provided in the book's accompanying CD. There is, after all, a pleasure to be had from listening to a language's music, whether understood or not.

For many readers of the project, it may come as a surprise to find that in the midst of our contemporary communities, which often seem to be homogenizing all too fast, there is such a hidden wealth of varied writing. Languages are as precious a resource as living species. Like them, they have evolved over many thousands of years, and their preservation ought to be accorded a similar importance. However, the impact of new communication technologies and the extremely rapid global expansion of English mean that many languages are under threat, and that even a position that seems secure today may prove vulnerable in one or two generations. If we care about the loss of languages, we need to raise our awareness of minority language communities now, and work to make them more rather than less visible. Many of those who will produce the literature of the future have difficult choices to make

about the language in which to write. Hopefully the EMLIT project may encourage some of the bilingual writers not to abandon their rarer language, by demonstrating that choosing to write in a minority language does not have to entail isolation. One of the project's unforeseen consequences has been to inspire a bilingual writer, who had stopped writing in her mother tongue, to resume.... It is a beginning.

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