

A Global Culture and Its Bottleneck: Preliminary Remarks On How Translations Are A Rare Resource In The Universal Chatter. And Why Translation Matters.

Abstract:

While globalisation made the world a small and highly integrated place, the number of books translated decreased, and oddly enough, even translations from the dominating lingua franca, English, got fewer. Why this happened, is hardly analyzed so far and poorly understood. In the wider debate of cultural diversity in the age of globalisation, the translation of books is a particularly critical case, as books are not only loaded with symbolic value, but are the traditional format and medium for highly complex and solidified knowledge for today's digital knowledge society. This essay is based on a substantial amount of empirical data and related insights and perspectives.

A few years ago, in 2002, I researched a small series of articles for the media arts festival Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria, ("Charting the Divide"¹), gathering data from various sources on the global trade in cultural items such as books, movies, or music, and interviewing representatives of major cultural and policy institutions with notable experience in this little monitored field. At one point, I came upon a set of UNESCO statistics, which were certainly questionable and dated, yet pointed at the bull's eye of what I had guessed already:

Paradoxically, the recent period of highly accelerated globalisation – from the early 1980s until today – coincides with a continuous and dramatic decline in the number of translations of books. And so far, little has been said to properly explain this odd development.

The main UNESCO figure I had come across, covered exactly the prime period of the recent globalisation in business, or more exactly, in international finance, when digital networks with a real time exchange of information were built to connect the global finance industries.² In that critical period of time between 1980 and 1994, the total number of translations of books was in continuous went down from 52,070 titles translated worldwide in 1980 to 50,434 in 1994.

This is the truly odd, yet significant observation to be made at a moment when, on March 18, 2007, the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions will enter into force after long debates.

1. What's in a book?

At a first glance, one may argue that, sure, when in the 1980s, direct flows of information (as the raw matter of knowledge) became seamlessly available, first for highly exclusive financial operators, but soon thereafter, in the 1990s with the Web, on a really so far unseen scale for everyone everywhere, the old fashioned book seemed to have gotten sidelined somehow. But this is to misunderstand the specific value of books.

So what are books in the first place? Formally, a book is an object, mostly printed on paper, of 64 pages or more, with an ISBN attached.

My personal definition of a book is quite different instead, as it is based on the more loosely knitted, yet more process oriented notion of what, in many cases, it is that incites someone to author a book. The answer goes: **When someone elaborates a complex set of ideas** – be it in fiction or non-fiction -, he or she will, more often than not, chose **a book** as the **universally acknowledged exchange format for those ideas**. Of course, one can also compose a work of

music then, or do a movie, but still, for that sort of discourse, books are the most common format.

After this first step of writing (or, more generally, of doing) a book, this book can address a readership, or be turned into a movie, or initiate a social or scientific discourse and, as a further consequence, some political or cultural movement, or whatever seems appropriate.

The secondary, yet also important qualities of books are those of a formally tightly closed and guarded container that, oddly enough, and with the exception of the few global bestsellers, have certain difficulties to take advantage of all the possibilities for cultural communication offered by the information age. Books come with restrictions, by copyright for instance, so that not anyone can forward, multiply or alter the book, and because often enough, authors claim to have done a significant job by doing a book, they want to be paid recognition, which is, by definition, a barrier and a restriction to the propagation of that container and its content. So, the limitations and restrictions are somehow inherent, or part of the special quality and value of a book. And yet, a book addresses the reader.

Books need the appreciation of a readership. Often enough, it is certainly not easy for a book to instantly win that readership, and so for very diverse reasons: Think of censorship, banning a book even before it is published, or think of Franz Kafka, whose books are universal today, but had print runs of a few hundred copies initially, or remained even, for most of them, unpublished during the author's life time, and still these books are seminal. These very limits are part of the exclusivity of books, hence of their value.

2. What's in a translation?

It is only reasonable to assume that translations (particularly of books, for the above mentioned reasons) are relevant elements in the process of a systematic and powerful exchange of ideas and of a dialogue between communities and cultures. Obviously, in return, the lack of translations may be a strong indicator for a relevant rift in that exchange.

Translations were perhaps the key to trigger the rise of European (and before that, of Arab) culture and education, when almost a thousand years ago, monasteries started to collect books and worked out, often through translations, how to make the old classical - Latin, and more importantly, Greek - thinking and writing accessible through translations via mostly Arab transcripts.

Many more recent examples could be brought to light, showing how throughout the 20th century, once again, translations of an unseen number of works and, even more importantly, between more languages than ever before, were kind of the light waves that made globalisation become what it has become, a truly universal force and factor for every society on this planet. Yet, translations are far from universally available.

In early October 2001, one month after 9/11, as a director of communication of the Frankfurt Book Fair, I tried to convince, over lunch, John Smith, a reporter with the International Herald Tribune, that this book fair was, pretty much like those old libraries in monasteries long ago, a unique gathering ground between the West and the Arab or Islamic culture with those hundreds of thousands of books from some 6000 publishers from over 100 countries on display and therefore accessible to the curiosity of the world and the media. I was absolutely wrong. When, some 10 days after having promoted my wishful thinking, I walked through the aisles of Arab publishers' stands, with really all of the significant and prestigious houses present, these aisles were empty. No Western soul was interested to even check them out.

Now some may argue that this reflects only the specific rift between Western and Arab or Islamic cultures and learning, as it was discussed convincingly most recently in a series of UN sponsored Human Development Reports.³ In fact, the lack of any working flow of relevant ideas, as they come when packaged in books, is a much wider phenomenon of our days.

More than 15 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain and after as many years of unhappy dealings of the West – of the US, Europe and NATO combined – with former Yugoslavia, one can hardly find translations of books that originate from within the region, telling their version of recent events. Or, as the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, recently noted: “What people in the countries think remains something of a mystery. British people travelling to those countries tell British audiences and readers what to think about them while the locals provide the sound bites.”⁴ This also underlines how, in reverse to globalisation, centrifugal forces are at work, resulting in culturally fragmented islands and regions, with little cohesive lines in between.

3. Patterns of Decline

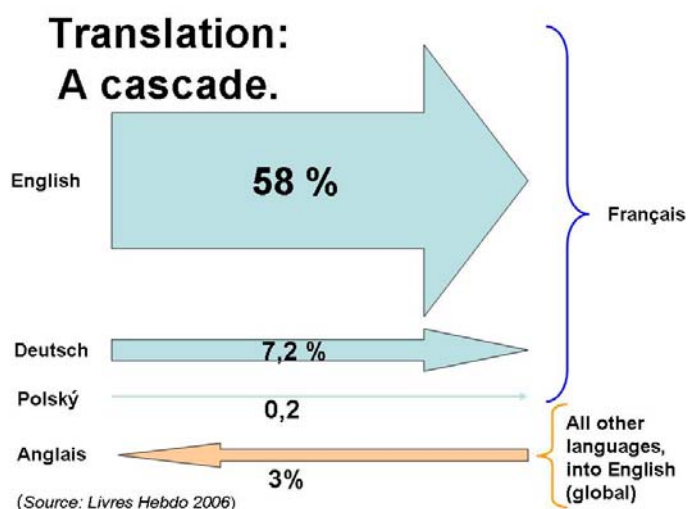
With a number of positive historical initiatives prominently in mind, one is tempted to largely overstate what books by themselves can achieve, or, more exactly, to what extent providing the right, good books and translations can win over audiences to also read those books. At least in the long run, audiences read – and publishers publish, and hence pick for translations – what they consider to be important – or entertaining - to the reading audience.

The main insight, though, may be as brutal and simple as that: **Translations don't follow cultural ideals, but power lines.**

For the French-German reconciliation after World War II, books and translations played certainly a key role. Reading Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre in Germany in the 1960s helped to get German intellectuals onto a European track, as much as French writers such as Michel Tournier and Alfred Grosser, and many others who pointed benevolently at those good, yet somehow a bit ‘difficult’ and ‘boring’ authors and ideas from a democratically revamped post war Germany were instrumental in reshaping the relationship between the hostile neighbours.

Little echo of those heroic efforts are to be found in the French and German book markets of today. In 2005, a mere 9.4 percent of all translations into German came from French originals (less than the numbers of children's books translated from various languages into German that same year). But this still brings French comfortably to the second rank in the overall translation statistics in Germany, as compared to 2.7 percent for Italian (# 3), or Dutch (2.5 percent, # 4) or Spanish (2.3 percent, #5). Compared to 60.2 percent of English originals however, all other languages and cultural in-roads seem to be peanuts, and no politically well intentioned process will ever mend this imbalance.

A very similar pattern defines, in return, a French perspective on translation, with, according to *Livres Hebdo* in 2006, 58 percent of translations from English originals, as compared to 7.2 percent from German, or 0.2 percent from Polish.⁵



In return, according to various estimates, only some 3 percent of translations worldwide go, on average, from all languages combined, back into English. Germany, which is on a global scale, a relatively strong exporter of cultural (or copyrighted) products, claims to sell 6.2 percent of translation rights to English language publishers.

However, bashing Anglo-Saxon cultural world dominance rather blurs a proper understanding of what is a much more complex set of dynamics. The more detailed set of statistics one looks at, the more stunning is the evidence and the conclusions one will deduct.

First of all, it is important to understand that at least two qualities are inherent in the global patterns of translation: On the one side, they seem to clearly follow a “the winner takes it all” dynamic as known from various sorts of knowledge networks, with their typical emergence of a very few dominating power nodes.⁶ This is reflected in the universal predominance of English, and, more and more often, in the growing market share held by a few globally successful authors and books, be it J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, or “The Da Vinci Code” of Dan Brown.

Second, translations hardly ever mirror a balanced exchange of ideas, or a ‘dialogue’ between equals, as, for example, the founding fathers of Europe after World War II were not tired to stress as their vision for a culturally diverse, yet united continent. Instead, the normal rule has it that translations travel ‘top down’, or from ‘stronger’ languages to the ‘lesser ones, but it is certainly more than delicate to even try to define what ‘stronger’ or ‘lesser’ really means.

Statistics are blunt and impartial, mapping flows of translations as cascades, with a clear indication of what is on top, and what is not. Those numbers can also help to understand how those balances can change over time, and why. The abrupt decline, after 1991, of translations from Russian in the former Soviet spectre of influence, as documented in the already quoted UNESCO statistics, is a pretty example in this regard.

More telling for our everyday environment of today are the more subtle and complex cases like that of Germany. “With 7,491 deals in the last year, German publishers have sold more licenses than ever before”, writes Riky Stock of the German Book Office in New York in a recent analyses, based on figures of 2005.⁷ Poland, with 604 titles (8.1 percent of all the licenses sold), was the top buyer of rights from Germany, followed by the Czech Republic, with 557 titles (7.4 percent of all the licenses sold).” In return, only 0.6 percent of all translations into German were in that same period from Polish, and 0.4 percent from Czech originals.

The huge ambitions of a powerful nation on the rise on a global scale, like China, leave its footprint on the translation market as well, by the number of translation rights bought, while selling those rights is a completely different story indeed. In 2005, Chinese publishers bought 379 German titles for translation, while a modest 31 were sold back to Germany, and in 2003, more German licences were granted for translation into Chinese than into any other language.⁸

But even those cascading schemes provide only one aspect, and not the entire picture of what shapes translation, the marketplace and the readership.

The most surprising point remains how and why, in an era of staggering globalisation, and disregarding the impact of information technologies, digitization of all formats of content, and the Internet, the overall number of translated books declines, and does so continually and, as it seems, systematically.

Again, Germany is a good case, both because it is such a strong importer of rights, and for its concise statistics, of course.

Original language	1982	1987	1991	1995	2000	2005
All languages	6773	9325	9557	10565	7631	6132
English			6298	7815	5519	3691

French			1182	973	730	575
Italian			335	271	282	168
Dutch			224	239	173	152
Spanish			286	198	131	139
Russian			250	184	107	113
Chinese			27	34	18	31
Arab			23	16	18	n.a. (*)
Polish			54	61	44	38
Czech			64	41	29	27
Fiction			4175	4704	2876	1542
Children & Youth			1231	1423	1026	971
Comics			n.a.	227	105	103

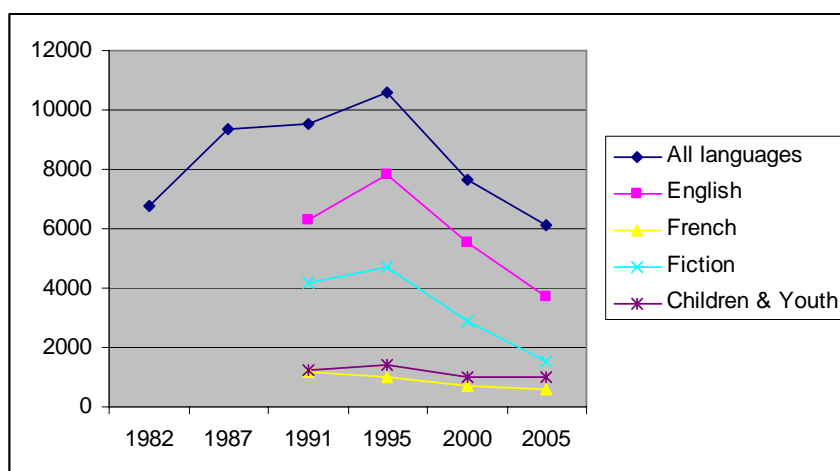
(*) 'n.a.' means not in Top 20

Source: *Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen*.

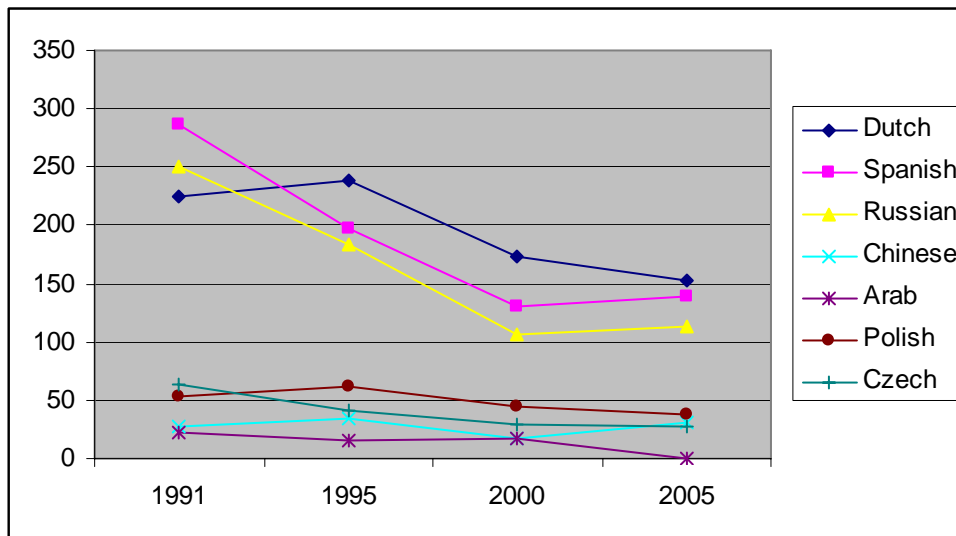
We noted from the very broad, unspecific UNESCO statistic the continuous decline of translations throughout the 1980s already, at a time when, in those culturally strong and open countries and markets like Germany, translations were still strongly on the rise. The much more reliable and detailed table on Germany shows how, here as well, the peak of translations is already over, and that after all the curiosity about a world that is opening up after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War in 1989, and despite all the ongoing globalization, a reverse force must have come into play, and it now defines what happens to translation.

Ironically, the curve of translated books started to come down exactly when, in the mid 1990s, the Internet, the World Wide Web and the digital information age made the broad and instant discovery of 'world culture' universally accessible, yet turning it into a highly fragmented, loose and individual experience. Frankly, I don't think that the internet 'killed' the translations of books, but there is some serious evidence that the emergence of the web coincided with a true and deep shift of parameters of how culture (and cultural values, for that matter) were disseminated and perceived, and books as that key format for Western culture were hit particularly strong by those tidal forces.

Translations from the dominant Anglo-Saxon sphere have not been spared by that shift, but were halved, from 7815 in 1995, to 3691 in 2005 (while translations from all languages came down a staggering 40 percent from 10.565 to 6132. (and no Harry Potter sorcery did anything about that downward spiral). That said, it is notable that between 1991 and 2005, translations from French were also more than halved from 1182 to 575, and in the overall picture, also their share came down from 12 percent to 9.4.



At the same time, some of the 'smaller' or 'lesser' languages like Polish, Czech or Chinese (if one can call Chinese a 'lesser' language, yet it did not increase despite of the global rise in prominence of China), survived, at their modest level, relatively untouched.



To complete the picture, one would need to extend the analyses at least along two or three more lines, even if this is beyond the scope of this essay.

One is the expanding export of English language books in their original language editions (and, most likely, of original language editions in other languages to educated audiences that prefer and are able to read the original). On a global scale, the export of English books alone is roughly a 5 billion dollar market, or the equivalent of almost half the German language book market, the second biggest book market in the world, and the global export of English titles (not translations) grew significantly and steadily over the past decade and a half.⁹ It is important to stress that with books, we don't talk predominantly about the US model, but of the entire English language sphere, which demonstrates all its muscle as a truly global role model for culture, and as the most universal lingo in the communication of ideas, values and stories today.

As a result, any talking about 'Global Reading' cannot be limited to the old 20th century notion of the "West" as the primary arena of book culture and reading. Particularly in Asia, the English language readership certainly grew by the tens of millions recently. Even if no data about those audiences is available, it is reasonable to assume that many of those tap into global middle class reading patterns, be it in translation or in the (mostly English) original editions of books.

A third line of investigation would need to follow sales ratios between those 'global' authors, books and subjects (like Potter, Da Vinci, etc.), and truly local stories and books. Comparisons of national bestselling titles provide strong evidence that reading preferences can be roughly divided between those few hands full of (translated, and predominantly originally English) global sellers, and highly localised successes with the audience, written in those many local languages.¹⁰

So once again, the translated set is probably not expanding in diversity, but rather focuses onto a few, yet strongly condensed global brands, while the patches of diversity show highly localized characteristics.

4. The biased economics of translation

Any serious understanding of the book translation markets requires, of course, an analysis of the particularly odd and biased economics of the sector.

It is common knowledge that literary translations (and translations of books in general) are very badly paid, as opposed to technical translations, e.g. of manuals for consumer products. With fees anywhere between 12 and (more commonly) 20 Euro (or between 15 and 25 US dollar) per standard page of 1800 characters, it is hard to make a living for a family with an activity without which there are no translated books in the first place.

In a recent controversy between translators and publishers in Germany – where translators want to have a percentage share in the success of a book, just like authors -, very renowned and award winning translators convincingly argued that many of their peers made not more than 1,000 Euro (or 1,300 USD) per month on average. Their publishers oppose them, with also convincing cost per title calculations at hand, arguing that any further increase in translation costs may only end up in further reducing the number of titles translated for publication. Now both sides hope that a court or even lawmakers remedy their ugly lot.

This is certainly nothing less than absurd. At a moment when the cake is already getting smaller every year, how should those actors on the market place – predominantly independent publishers and translators – who, each, already take almost all of the risk, and who, in many cases, have no reasonable way of being rewarded for their risk taking, fiddle between themselves alone in order to solve a riddle that mirrors the current odds of cultural diversity as a whole! Yet both sides seem so far insist on doing just that, and all by themselves. This is probably the wrong battle, fought by the wrong parties in the first place.

The current dispute started over the unexpected success of Alessandro Baricco's "Seta" ("Silk" - original Italian edition at Rizzoli 1996, German translation by Karin Krieger at Piper, 1997) in the German translation several years ago, as the translator sued her publisher, claiming a percentage share of the unexpected revenue – which the publisher at first declined.

The fact is that such an unexpected success as Baricco's "Silk", at such a scale, is more the exception than the rule in the international trade for translation rights. While a few books can, literally overnight, be auctioned for markets around the globe, especially at the Frankfurt and London Book Fairs, at 6 digit licence fees, thus causing tremendous risk to the publisher who buy, many a nationally bestselling book finds no international buyer at all, with UK and US publishers being the most reluctant, even at the most modest fees of a few thousand dollars.

All those little wanted titles, at the same time, together build the world's treasures of cultural diversity, with all its surprises. If at all, they are mostly gobbled up by small and economically weak independent publishers. For them, the up front investment of anything between at least 5 and 10.000 dollars for rights, translation and editing, before even thinking to bring the unknown book of an often unknown, or little known author to a niche audience, represents an extremely tough hurdle, with little economical rationale to assume the risk. In by far the majority of books, breaking even after a few years by selling the first edition, and with no additional revenue opportunities in view, is the best a publisher can expect.

As for the translator, who often also scouts a title and the author for the publisher of the translation, the risk is to bring yet another failure, and thereby ruin the own reputation and credibility.

Oddly enough, all the other onlookers and bystanders, those who for instance professionally talk about the books in the media or to students, are commonly comfortably well paid as academics, or journalists, or both. The mediators, as individuals and as organisations, receive public and private funding for their cultural activities. Yet, it is those two high risk players, translators and publishers, who, in a shrinking market environment for translated books, who want to solve the problem of cultural diversity in books, take it or break it, alone.

It needs to be added that, what hardly finds a positive solution in a wealthy, translation savvy market of almost 100 million inhabitants, like Germany plus Austria and Switzerland, is even more unlikely to safeguard a varied cultural offering in, say, a country of two million like Slovenia.

5. Back to a global view of books

At that point, it seems only appropriate to take up, once again, a global perspective on books and their translation.

Today's challenge is not so different from those days in the past of almost a thousand years ago, when libraries in Cordoba or in Cluny collected, organized and translated not 'books', but sources of knowledge. The stage, however, is not set primarily by libraries, or publishers – not even those huge global and multimedia conglomerates that have formed over the past decade.

Change is arguably more driven by companies that organize audiences, not content, like Google or Amazon or eBay, but also community based platforms like eBay, blogs or Web 2.0 nodes like MySpace, Flickr YouTube, or as a pioneer, Wikipedia, who teach us how closely related are the various formats of content, or, more emphatically, knowledge and insight, from the perspective of those who want to use it.

These spheres seem to be multilingual, or fluid between cultures, affiliations and languages by definition. A glimpse at the international start page of Wikipedia, points us to a polyglot world where 349.000 user-generated Polish articles match 202.000 Spanish, or 328.000 Japanese (or 543.000 in German).¹¹

The realm of books, by comparison, pale and uniform, not only by the dwindling numbers of translations, and the tiny trickle of multilingual communication once we are past the three globally dominant languages, English, German and French. The entire logistics of bringing books from one language into another, and the ways how these rights are handled and the cost is financed, has not seen substantial innovation for a long time.

Market forces are still by far the defining factors of the bookish landscape and its pathways. With consolidation in the book business growing rapidly since the late 1990s, those more experimentally minded independent publishing ventures which traditionally represent the majority of at least literary translations, have come increasingly under economic pressure – as is reflected in the statistics mentioned before. Those sheer market forces are only compensated by government funds from more and more countries eager to promote their national literature, often enough with pretty limited success. The resulting books however are still aiming at the old pipes for publication and distribution, without broadly exploring and using those more effective and focused channels opened with digital media and the internet for more than a decade now.

And yet, we have substantial reasons to assume that books, for some time, will continue to host a higher degree of solidified knowledge and insight than web pages, even those of high sophistication.

6. Conclusions, lessons and guesses.

The point has to be made that book publishers have so far not been at the forefront of exploring those new perspectives in their potential to enhance the old universe of books and readers. Quite the opposite is true. The internet and the new, certainly chaotic developments have been not so much perceived as a set of opportunities, but either as irrelevant, or as a threat. Innovation has been held back, in the defence against the winds of change.¹²

It has not been explored sufficiently how the knowledge basis of books and the internet relate to each other; or how books relate to the other content formats, be it music, movies, or art. And most of all, the delicate balance of how books are conceived as both tradable goods and products, and as cultural items of symbolic value, has been taken, at least in many European countries, as a granted chip to negotiate for ever more protection, while neglecting the rapid changes in a fickle audience that has learned to switch seamlessly between channels, formats and loyalties.

A highly diverse and fragmented, and thereby curious and knowledgeable reading audience does exist though, as is shown not only by the ever increasing complexity of bestseller profiles, or by the only emerging patterns of preferences in the 'Long Tail'¹³ of globally millions of available titles. Independent music labels and movie festivals worldwide have brought about convincing evidence that cultural audiences are in fact ready to get interested in new works from Outer Mongolia to inner Paris. Now readers will expect the same from books, to represent the entire world, and be available from everywhere, and anywhere.

The success of a few internationally acclaimed titles of success gradually hides the wider paradox of how flows between markets, cultures and languages are drying up. With the decline of translations, a centrepiece of book culture, namely their universality and diversity, is at once at risk. A turf war between publishers and translators can't resolve the fundamental riddle of the current implosion of the translation market. But we probably need to acknowledge that for a growing number of books, we may have a potentially interested reading audience, but no viable business model in a purely market driven book economy. Thus, the traditional rights markets alone are not enough to organize a universal network of books and ideas through translation, and public funding as offered already by many countries for translations is not enough either to bridge the widening gap between the cultural expectations and the economical limitations.

Frankly, I don't think that there is one remedy to prevent all that change in the world of books, and that is alright. But we need to think of how to prevent an even greater loss in how ideas and knowledge are shared. In fact, translations allow us to measure with astounding accuracy where globalisation culturally works, and where not.

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Footnotes:

¹ Ars Electronica 2002, Updates.

http://www.wischenbart.com/de/essays_interviews_rw/wischenbart_cultural-divide.htm

² Saskia Sassen: The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow, 1988.

³ Arab Human Development Reports, published regularly since 2001 by United Nations Development Programs, UNDP, first in 1999, and then yearly since 2002. For details, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Human_Development_Report

⁴ Finds in translation. The Guardian, 10 May 2006.

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/cultureculture/archives/2006/05/10/finds_in_transl.html

⁵ Livres Hebdo, 2006.

⁶ For an introduction into networks, nodes and their dynamics, see Albert-László Barabási: Linked. How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life. New York, Plume, Penguin, 2003, S. 56ff.

⁷ Riky Stock: Translation and Globalization. Reception of German Writers and Translators At Home and Abroad. Unpublished manuscript. Courtesy by the author.

⁸ As reported by Frankfurt Book Fair director Jürgen Boos after the Beijing International Book Fair, quoted in Die Welt, 4 September 2006.

⁹ Estimate by RW, based on US and UK export statistics.

¹⁰ Throughout 2006, and still continuing, we could, on a monthly basis, map the top 10 fiction and non fiction lists for the USA, UK, Spain, France, Sweden, the Czech Republic and, to a lesser degree, Germany, Italy and Austria.

¹¹ <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

¹² See a detailed analysis of book publishing and innovation in Europe in Publishing Market Watch, Final Report, at

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media_taskforce/doc/pmw_20050127.pdf .

¹³ Chris Anderson: The Long Tail. Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More. Hyperion 2006.