

THERE IS NO BIBLIODIVERSITY WITHOUT LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

by Pierre Astier

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this very interesting forum: to Medea, to...

Who am I?

I am a former publisher. My career in the publishing business started in 1988 with a quarterly short stories magazine *Le Serpent à Plumes*, much inspired from *Granta Magazine*. Then I created a publishing house in 1993 (twenty-one years ago), *Le Serpent à Plumes Editions*. Until 2004, when it was swallowed by a group. Then I was fired for being, let's say, too uncontrollable. I left. I had published more than 500 books, mainly French and translated Fiction. Becoming an agent was sort of natural for me, a logical step. I knew what I did owe to agents, I had been fully satisfied with bringing books to the French or French-speaking readers, and bringing books to wider audiences, not French-speaking, was a New and Exciting challenge.

One day in 2006, we had just started the Agency with Laure Pécher, an author whose first name is Vincent, asked for an appointment. Quite successful in France, he wanted to complain about his publisher who “was not doing anything to sell translation rights”. He said:

- Imagine, I am not even translated in English.
- Listen, it's not easy to be published in US or UK, I said. Only around 3% of books published in US are translations. And being translated in English will not necessarily bring you thousands of readers. But aren't you translated in other languages? German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch?
- No, he said, unfortunately. Well, he added, hesitating, to be honest, I am actually translated in Georgian.
- Waowwhhh, I said, this is fantastic!
- Boh... Really, he said?

– Listen, Vincent, this is a mythical country, a mythical people, a mythical language. Have you seen this fabulous alphabet? Don't you feel proud to have your novel translated in such a language? [Don't forget you are a White Caucasian male, I said.]

He left. Very doubtful about my project. I did not see him again. Probably he thought I was not the right agent for him, maybe he saw me as a loser. He was a nice guy, but no curiosity, no sense of humour, an obvious lack of culture.

Three weeks ago, I met a Georgian author Lasha Bugadze in Paris, thanks to Médéa. He is a writer in residence in Paris at the Recollets Convent.

– Have you ever been translated, I asked?

– Yes, he said, one of my novels, *Literature Express*, has been published by Dalkey Archive.

– Waoohh, I said, that's an excellent publishing house, a reference.

– Really, he said?

– Yes, sure, I said. And also, you can be read more easily by German, French, Italian publishers. Lots of French authors would sell their own grand-mother for this...

– Really?

– Yes.

We then had a casual conversation. I felt he had a lot of curiosity, a great sense of humour, a lot of culture.

BEING A LITERARY AGENT IN 2014

In 2014, being a literary agent in a world with open borders (except for a few strongholds such as North Korea or Cuba – though less and less – and open borders not for everyone, unfortunately) and high speed communication means, allows for a huge range of possibilities. It also means that, not only is a global approach to importing/exporting rights now made possible, but an exciting issue as well.

What does an agent need to work?

To work accurately, a literary agent needs:

- Good writers and good texts,
- A network of reliable clients (publishers and producers)
- As many intermediaries as possible (scouts, translators, academics, booksellers, journalists, festival and book fair organizers, literary juries, people in charge of public cultural policies, etc.),
- A good database,
- Some culture, a great deal of enthusiasm, curiosity and an understanding of book markets.

Not to mention “flair”, that alchemy that nobody has the magical recipe for. Except Christopher MacLehose, maybe, who has three books in the UK Best-sellers list presently?

All those “professional partners” co-exist in our database, which has to be updated daily. Each author and each client equals a profile, a pack of various details and specifications (e-mails, social media subscribers, plus many figures such as home and cell phone numbers, etc.) that are essential for work.

As an agent, I feel a lot like a detective, like a Sherlock Holmes, trying to compile as many details as possible, always wondering about who is who and in charge of what.

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY OR MULTILINGUALISM

The question of language is fundamental:

- The language in which authors write,
- The language in which publishers publish,
- The language of films,
- The language in which one communicates [the world/global language, today, is English. This is widely accepted. Still, in France, some protest against this matter of fact. They consider that the French language has not yet lost the battle of universal vocation. *Much ado about nothing*. The fact that French ranks among the top five languages in the world should be challenging enough: how can we bring knowledge

and books to 700 million Francophones in 2050?

UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is convinced that cultural diversity and multilingualism on the Internet have a key role to play in fostering pluralistic, equitable, open and inclusive knowledge societies. UNESCO encourages its Member States to develop comprehensive language-related policies, to allocate resources and use appropriate tools in order to promote and facilitate linguistic diversity and multilingualism, including the Internet and media. In this regard, the Organization supports the inclusion of new languages in the digital world, the creation and dissemination of content in local languages on the Internet and mass communication channels, and encourages multilingual access to digital resources in the cyberspace.

The question of languages is central to the strategy of a literary agency. Choices must be made, and options taken:

- Which selection of authors to represent, and writing in which language?
- Which publishers, publishing in which language, to sell translation rights to?
- Which producers, shooting in which language, to sell film rights to?

We are lucky, as a literary agency, to be based in Paris, at the crossroads of several prominent cultures, in a city which has attracted outstanding international authors, where major works of Fiction and Non Fiction have been written, a city where finding readers, translators and experts in almost all languages is possible. So the issue of language, for us, not only is not a barrier, but always an exciting challenge.

We loved selling the rights of a Macedonian novelist (Goce Smilevski) in 32 countries, having to find readers (in Bulgarian because of the similarity of the language and the alphabet), translators, and experts. We love selling the rights of a Ukrainian novelist (Andrej Kokotyuha), a Romanian novelist (Simona Sora) or Estonian, Icelandic, Polish or Lebanese authors (Tiit Aleksejev, Gyrdur Eliasson, Hubert Klimko Dobrazniecki, Rabee Jaber) as much as French authors (from Europe, Africa and North Africa, Middle East, North America). And we will be glad, in the near future to try selling Indonesian and Malaysian literature.

So *a priori*, an author writing in English, published in English and potentially adaptable (because readable) in English, although he has unquestionable advantages, is not particularly what we are looking for. Although that should be the easiest way for an agent to work, we preferred the more complex way.

MAPPING THE WORLD

The first version of the database which we conceived, at the agency, included a list of countries and a list of languages. The list of countries included 135 countries (for the record, there were 72 sovereign states in the world in 1945, 88 in 1955, 156 in the post-colonial world of 1975, 193 in the post-Soviet-Union and post-Yugoslavian world of 2014).

The initial list of languages included mostly Western European and Asian dominant languages. Over the years, our list of languages has increased to reach 50 languages (not yet Corsican or Breton or Quechua, but Malayalam and Bengali [that are not minority languages] and Wolof: yes). This is nothing compared to the thousands of languages (and alphabets) that have shaped our civilization, and should be considered. But for us, adding a new language to the list of languages in our database (and we have not yet outlined a typology of alphabets) is, systematically, like opening a door on a new world. And our curiosity for the world is insatiable.

Each language added to our database is a victory. Because it means:

- A book market or an emerging book market,
- A place with writers,
- A place where people are open to learning, having access to knowledge or entertaining *via* books,
- And consequently an area for publishing.

Each language is:

- An open gate on a culture,
- An open gate on a history,
- An open gate on a people (with its characteristics, customs, emotions),
- An open gate on a network of authors, publishers, agents, scouts, experts of all

kinds (those who contribute to the large international book industry, which is responsible for protecting our cultural inheritance and shaping our future).

SMALL OR MINORITY LANGUAGES AND BIBLIODIVERSITY

A few years ago, the French-American publisher André Schiffrin (ex-Pantheon Books, then founder of the New Press), who died in 2013, predicted the end of a trade in his essay, *L'Edition sans éditeurs*. He was a man of great culture, a very respected person, but his arguments on the publishing business were particularly pessimistic. He stated that international conglomerates had taken over the publishing business and therefore changed the way we read. Although he was right to blow the whistle about the dangers of concentration (in the Anglo-American world), he failed to consider the rejoicing proliferation of small and independent structures all around the world, publishing books in all languages. And the durability of the author-publisher couple.

During the last twenty-five years, we have witnessed fascinating historical and political evolutions in the world. After a century (the 20th century, a century of destruction), the quest for identity in the post-colonial and post-communist world is stronger than ever. Books, Fiction, Non Fiction, Authors, publishers, agents, we must all support it.

In the agency, we are especially sensitive to the issue of small and minority languages (authors and publishers) who express the broad diversity of the world. Languages are our common good, they are treasure that have to be protected as much as works of art. As long as a spoken language has writers and publishers, it is, in a way, alive, saved, protected.

Historically, cultures were formed within geographical areas (which borders do not always overlap) including lakes or seas, rivers, mountains. Religions, beliefs, etc.

We started being seriously concerned about “Caucasus” after becoming aware of the geographical reality of the countries bordering the Black Sea, as a singular space between Europe and Asia, between Russia, Iran and Turkey, all countries that were and still are the home of great civilizations.

My own approach to cultures, countries, and literatures has often taken place through short stories, these short fiction pieces that tell more about a given country's culture than a newspaper column or a report. My life as a publisher began with the magazine of short stories (*Le Serpent à Plumes*), as I said, and continues with a collection of Short stories (*Miniatures, Magellan & Cie*), in parallel with my main activity: literary agent. My colleague Laure Pécher was in Armenia in March. Our interest in Caucasus, in Georgia and Armenia is strong.

The Frankfurt Book Fair, choosing Georgia as guest of honor in 2018, decides to focus on a small country, with a so-called “small language” and a non-Latin alphabet, thus showing the way to regarding, enhancing, and stimulating an old culture in the present time. This is an outstanding cultural move with an expected strong impact on Georgia and on the whole region. The Frankfurt Book Fair, not only concerned by mass-economy book markets, plays a key role in choosing Georgia, thus asserting that there cannot be any support to biodiversity (worldwide) without a clear support to linguistic diversity (worldwide).

As an international literary agency, we feel committed to such a project, which is not only commercial or political, but cultural as well, and aiming at sustaining both the written and the printed word.

We do not think this way: small or big countries, small or big publishers, well-known or unknown authors. We are most of all looking for people very involved in what they do, who do what they do with passion, writers and publishers. And there are many here in Tbilisi, as I guess.

Thank you