**At the Frankfurt Book Fair** ▪ Esther Allen

# Lost in translation

FRANKFURT, Germany

It's late Friday night, and I'm in a taxi with a bunch of Catalans, desperately seeking a salsa club. We're taking refuge from a party Catalan officials are hosting in their capacity as this year's guest of honor at Frankfurt's renowned book fair.

Until now, Frankfurt has invited only countries (India, China) or multinational groupings (the Arab world) as guests of honor. Catalonia, which has the status of an autonomous community in Spain, is the first such entity accorded such an invitation.

Being a guest of honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair is about as good an opportunity any literary culture can have to break through the dominant patterns of literary globalization and to introduce itself to the German-speaking world and beyond.

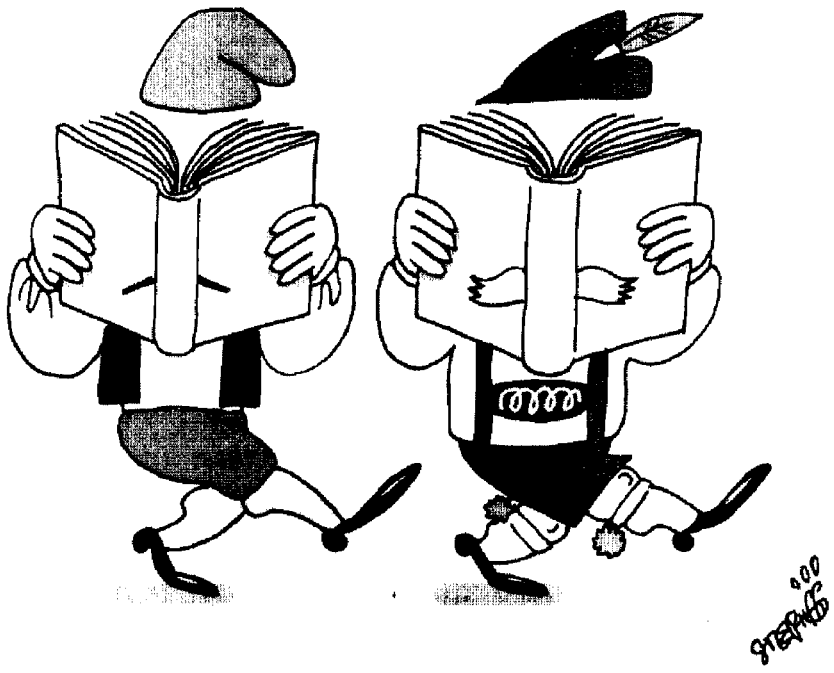
In preparation for the book fair, many Catalan organizations spent months preparing Catalan books in German; preparing their own books, brochures and pamphlets about Catalan culture and literature, and arranging numerous readings and Catalan cultural events across Germany.

With the fair underway, Catalonia was throwing a party every night in the cavernous old Bockenheimer Depot.

This night's celebration features a vast array of delectable Catalan foods and wines, followed — perhaps in a gesture of deference to the presumptive tastes of the host country — by the far less palatable thump of head-splitting techno.

Our group needs to find some music we can really dance to. We've been working together for two years preparing a study of translation and globalization that we presented at the fair.

Commissioned by the Institut Ramon Llull and the London-based head office of International PEN, the study analyzes the "translation economy" — the flow of literary voices across linguistic and political boundaries — of the English-speaking world in contrast to other literary cultures, including Catalonia's.



The topography of the fair itself illustrates the report's findings. Halls 5 and 6 are filled with signs in many alphabets, their aisles ringing with a polyphony of languages. The International Center and the Translators Center, both in Hall 5, host back-to-back events all day, every day, dealing with international, cross-cultural and multilingual issues.

But when you come to Hall 8, you have to line up for a metal detector. And once in, you hear and see only one language — this is the English-language hall. I never got over to Hall 8 this year, but during last year's fair I wandered by to say hello to some American publisher friends and was struck by how lavish the stands are. The stands in Halls 5 and 6 are spiffy, but in Hall 8 it's immediately clear that a great deal more money has been spent. This is where the sellers are.

**The English-speaking world pays so little attention to writing in other languages.**

The English-speaking world buys so little at the fair and pays so little attention in general to writing in other languages that it doesn't even keep statistics about the percentage of books published in English that are translations. The figure of 3 percent, often bandied about, is almost certainly high.

No industry or agency in the United States or any other English-speaking country considers the issue important enough to keep track of it. In places like Catalonia or the Netherlands, by contrast, statistics on books translated into and out of the local language are a key cultural indicator, carefully monitored by government and cultural agencies.

And that's only one aspect of English's global linguistic monopoly. In countries that publish far more work in translation than English does — which is to say most countries in the world — the large majority of the translations are from English. What's more, the growing market for English books exported, sold and read in English in regions outside the English-speaking world already amounts to $3 billion per year.

The report on translation and globalization that Carles Torner, of the Institut Ramon Llulland, and I have put together is an example of the Catalans' ability to be local and think globally. By addressing their own need to be translated into the world's global language in such an all-inclusive way — the report includes case studies of Argentina, China, the Netherlands and several other countries — the Catalans have given everyone concerned a means for further inquiry into the linguistic domination of English.

There are signs that this inquiry is already having an impact in the United States. Last year, several American universities announced the establishment of new centers devoted to translation, and publications like the New Yorker and The New York Times Book Review have devoted entire issues to international writing in translation.

Far-sighted as they've been when it comes to global linguistic issues, however, Catalonia's cultural politicians have not been without their blind spots on matters closer to home. Catalonia is a bilingual region and many of its writers write in Spanish, but only those who write in Catalan were featured in Frankfurt.

Wandering the aisles of the Book Fair, I overheard full-throated denunciations of this from Spanish-speaking Catalans who charge Catalonia with using the same exclusionary measures against them that were used against Catalan speakers during the long decades of Franco's dictatorship.

The standard response from Catalonia is that in a world where minority languages are dying out, the survival of Catalan as a living language and a literary culture depends on such preferential treatment.

At last we find the place we're looking for. The songs are in Spanish and the menu is in German and English, and after a sip of our margaritas we're out spinning across the floor to a syncopated "Guantanamera."

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