

Mapping German Fiction in Translation

Visualizing Translationalism in the German National Library Catalogue

Teichmann, Lisa

lisa.teichmann@mail.mcgill.ca
Université de Montréal, Canada

According to the Index Translationum, German is one of the most translated languages worldwide (Index Translationum, “Statistics”). To this date, however, tools to map and explore the routes of literary transfer of German literature through translation have only been marginally developed (Rühl and Bold 2016; Ivanovic and Seidl 2016; Gerber 2008, Reynolds and Vitali 2021) and comprehensive datasets on German fiction in translation are yet to be curated. Furthermore, even though a methodological framework for the analysis of translation as a network of transfer has long taken shape within the field of translation sociology (Bachleitner and Wolf 2004, Heilbron 1999, Sapiro 2016) and especially polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1979), to date there is still a lack of quantitative models for bibliographic translation data and a “Big Translation History” (Fólica et al. 2020) of German fiction.

In response to the sparsity of translation datasets and models of analysis, I have curated a dataset and developed a quantitative model for German fiction in translation as part of my doctoral thesis and a research internship with the German National Library Datschop. Due to its collection policies and data accessibility, the German National Library catalogue is an immensely rich open resource for bibliographic data with translations of German fiction accounting for 3.5% of catalogued fiction titles. To visualize and analyze translation data of German fiction – that is German fiction translated into other languages – geographically and as a network, I used the library catalogue’s data fields on language, author, and publication place within the RStudio environment.

I extracted all the titles of translated German fiction between 1980 and 2020 from the catalogue with the help of a customized search query. The resulting dataset, the first of its kind for this library catalogue, consists of over 35,000 translated titles and 6,000 translated authors. By presenting the first quantitative study of German fiction in translation, with visualizations of the bibliographic data from the German National Library catalogue, this project contributes to making this rich resource of bibliographic data as well as a quantitative model of analysis accessible within and beyond the field of Digital Humanities (DH), German and Translation Studies, and Comparative Literature.

I argue that making use of the wealth of bibliographic data available and modeling German fiction in translation is long overdue, especially since the possible findings have important implications for the core arguments in literary studies at large and German Studies specifically — canonization, world literature versus national literatures, and literary communities. In line with scholars such as Susan Bassnett (2014), Doris Bachmann-Medick (2009), Emily Apter (2013), and Rebecca Walkowitz (2017), my aim is to widen the theoretical implications to focus on transfer, literary networks, and the global distribution of works of literature by drawing on translation as an analytical category. The underlying hypothesis of my model of analysis is that the translations’ languages connect places by shared authors. Visualizing the language network

by shared, translated authors reveals connections between literary communities that transgress unilingual canons and therefore challenges categories of “national”, “canonical”, and “world” literature. Accordingly, I see this project contributing to the translational turn in German Studies, expanding the concept of literary transfer by applying a language network model and visualizing connections between linguistic communities of translated authors.

For this paper, I will present my dataset and model of analysis, a combination of social network analysis, descriptive statistics, and geomapping aiming to discuss where, into which languages, and which authors’ German fiction is most frequently translated. I further ask, what are the roles of canonical authors in the global circulation of German fiction in translation and those of non-canonical (translational) authors in connecting linguistic and literary communities in geographic space? My results indicate that routes of literary transfer through translation are highly centralized and interconnected in few languages but have also revealed the importance of peripheral languages and non-canonical authors in these processes. As I argue, factoring in translation as its own analytical category and visualizing the roles it plays in the national and global canonization of an author or work of fiction challenges our understanding of the national and the world literary canons of German fiction.

By curating and making available the dataset as well as the code scripts for analysis, this project further adds to the quantitative turn in translation studies as well as multilingual DH by presenting a multilingual dataset and offering solutions in working with bibliographic translation data across different languages. Within translation sociology, this project draws heavily on field theory by conceptualizing the translational field as a space where translationalism — the notion that characterizes authors whose work in translation connects multiple linguistic communities in geographic space — takes shape. Thereby, my analysis not only addresses the roles of specific languages and authors, but also utilizes their connections and routes of transfer to visualize their positionings in the field of translation. Additionally, pointing out catalogue-specific features that pose limitations for extracting and analyzing translations opens up a discussion on the (in)visibility of translations in literary studies, library and information sciences, critical archival studies, and DH.

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