

Literary Translation in Anglo-American and Lithuanian Contexts (1990-2008)

Jurgita Vaičenonienė

Abstract. Translation of any country's literature can be compared to a cultural export whose aim is to introduce a particular culture to foreign readers. With this idea in mind, the present paper discusses several related issues. First, it evaluates the current situation of literary translation in US and UK, the two dominant cultures and countries. Second, it surveys the development of literary translation in Lithuania with special reference to translations from and into English. Literary translation, as viewed in the paper, covers both prose and poetry translated from Lithuanian into English and published in anthologies or books. The theoretical background of the paper is largely based on the ideas of Lawrence Venuti (1995), who claims that in literary translation dominant cultures tend to shade minor ones. Among other things, this dominance can be manifested in the selection of books for translation and the visibility of a translator in the final product. The analysis of the data has revealed that Venuti's (1995) claims to the effect that English and American publishers seem not to invest much into translating literature of other, especially minor, cultures were corroborated. Contrary to the situation regarding the dominant cultures, Lithuania as a small country is open for translations of literature coming from both dominant and minor cultures. However, the statistics show that the majority of translated books come from publishers in the US and UK. As for Lithuanian literary translations into other languages, translations of Lithuanian literature into English dominate although they are more oriented towards European rather than Anglo-American audiences. Books translated into English are often published by Lithuanian or foreign non-profit publishers.

Key words: *Lithuanian literature, cultural translation, dominant/ minor country.*

Introduction

The cultural, political, economic and other influences of Lithuania on other countries, in comparison to the United States of America or England, are visibly minor. Today, towards the end of the second decade as an independent country, Lithuania is still striving to be recognized and acknowledged by world community as a unique country with its own customs, traditions and cultural heritage. The spread of the Lithuanian culture, no doubt, is important for the formation of the image of the country.

Translation, which is often metaphorized as a bridge uniting different worlds, is a perfect opportunity to disseminate Lithuanian culture worldwide. Literature, from the cultural studies perspective, is viewed as one form of the multitude of existing cultural "signifying practices" (Abrams, 1999, p.53). Thus translation of literature can be compared to cultural export which introduces Lithuania to the foreign reader. Having in mind the status of English as a global language,

"...books in English serve an important intermediary mission. When we have an English translation, we can use it to present the work to the entire world" (Jonikaitė, 2008).

Although the issue of literary translation into Lithuanian has been discussed widely by Lithuanian scholars and translators (an exhaustive bibliography of the articles can be found in the webpage of *The Lithuanian Association of Literary Translators*), the situation regarding Lithuanian translations into English has been neglected. Researchers mostly focus on translation criticism rather than on quantitative and general survey of translated books in Lithuanian and foreign contexts. With this idea in mind, the present paper aims to discuss several questions. First, to

evaluate the current situation of literary translation (further on LT) in US and UK, the globally dominant countries. Second, to survey the development of LT in Lithuania since 1990, especially from and into the English language. Literary translation, as viewed in the paper, covers both poetry and prose by Lithuanian writers translated into English and published in anthologies or books. Translations published in periodicals are not discussed.

The book publishing data of the English speaking countries have been taken from UNESCO's Literary Translation portal which serves

"as a centre for information, guidance and encounter for all those <...> working on the discovery and promotion of still unknown literatures" (Index Translationum-World Bibliography of Translation, 2003).

The portal offers the international bibliography of translations work tool which provides the official statistics on books in all fields of knowledge translated in approximately a hundred UNESCO Member States from 1979 to 2005. As to the Lithuanian LT, the material has been retrieved from two sources,

(1) the official Internet page of *The Lithuanian Association of Literary Translators* which provides an official statistics of Lithuanian books in 2006-2008 and

(2) the website of a non-profit organization *Books from Lithuania*, which works as a literary information centre and translation promoting fund, also providing continuously updated bibliographical information of Lithuanian literature translated into other languages.

Theoretical Assumptions: Translation of a Minority Literature

In the development of translation studies as an independent discipline, the 1990s can be characterized by application of diverse methodologies (e.g. computerized corpora), theories (e.g. postcolonialism, globalization) and emerging new inter-disciplines (e.g. cultural studies) (Venuti, 2000, p.333). The decade signaled a shift of perspective in translations moving from “translation as text to translation as culture and politics” (Munday, 2001, p.127). The new approach, referred to as a cultural turn, emphasized the analysis of translated texts from an ideological and cultural studies point of view. Two significant trends dominating in the works of the cultural turn researchers can be distinguished: the “ideology of translation”, which is relevant for the present needs of the paper and “translation of ideology” (Hatim, 2001, p.11).

With respect to the “ideology of translation”, the question of power and status between the source and target cultures and their effect on translation is central (Munday, 2001, p.135). Venuti’s work, who often presents himself as an American translator, reflects the key trends of culture and ideology-oriented research of the 1990s since

“it theorizes translation according to poststructuralist concepts of language, discourse, and subjectivity so as to articulate their relations to cultural difference, ideological contradiction and social change” (Venuti, 2000, p.340).

Representing an Anglo-American perspective on LT, Venuti’s ideas develop in two directions. First, the outer environment of the text, that is, diverse factors influencing its translation and publishing into foreign language are dealt with. Second, the inner or textual level is analyzed paying attention to the prevailing Anglo-American translation practices and procedures.

The scholar claims that in translation dominant cultures such as American or English tend to shade minor ones. This dominance is most visibly manifested in (1) the selection of books for translation and (2) the choice of translation strategies. Publishers choose to translate works of literature which are popular in source and other foreign countries without a risk to suffer commercial failure. Translations are downgraded as having no or little literary value; if translated, texts are expected to be fluent, rendered in standard American or British English, with no visible traces of foreign cultural and linguistic elements. Such behavior assimilates and enforces the foreign text with domestic values, codes and ideologies. To quote Venuti:

Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures.<...> Foreign literatures tend to be dehistoricized by the selection of texts for translation, removed from the foreign literary traditions where they draw their significance. And foreign texts are often rewritten to conform to styles and themes that currently prevail in domestic literatures... (Venuti, 1999, p.67).

To illustrate how domesticating selectivity in books and authors to be translated effect the formation of cultural stereotypes, Venuti (1999, p.71) discusses a case of Japanese fiction translated into English. The Japanese

literature translated into English in the period of 1950s and 1960s included only a very limited choice of authors and topics which rather represented the interests of translators rather than literary situation in Japan. However, they were presented as a Japanese literary canon. Translations mainly referred to traditional Japanese culture, spoke of the nostalgia to the lost past and presented Japan as exotic, distant and foreign. The books which were not dealing with the selected topics such as the war or postwar eras, were comical or presented not traditional, but modernized and westernized Japan were simply not translated. The formed image of traditional and exotic country lasted through the 1970s and 1980s. The established academic canon of Japanese literature was shaken only by the end of 1980s by the post-war generation of writers who “were skeptical of the down-dragging melancholy of so much Japanese fiction” and rather concentrated on modern Japanese fiction read not only in academic circles, but by most people. (Venuti, 1999, p.73).

In order to oppose domesticating translation practices, Venuti offers minoritizing translation. It involves translation of foreign texts which have minority status in their native canons and developing translation discourses deviant from the standard language. Translations deviant from the established standard in their choices, dialects, registers and styles may serve to promote cultural innovation and understanding of “the other” (Venuti, 1999, p.11).

Venuti’s theory is criticized by some scholars for concentrating solely on Anglo-American perspective while neglecting other foreign theorists working in the same field (Simon, 1999). Anthony Pym, for example, notes that Venuti overuses “binary oppositions” such as good or bad translations, dominant and minor cultures, etc., which make his arguments become “simply ideas about what cultures should be and how language should be used” (Pym, 1999). Pym goes on to claim that domestication or fluency in translation is typical not only for English, but other languages as well, despite the power and domination of translated and translating cultures (as quoted in Munday, 2001, p.155). The scholar notes ironically that although speaking in favour of the minor cultures and literatures, Venuti himself writes “in perfectly standard academic English” and is published by “a major international publisher that is not particularly interested in carrying translations” (Pym, 1999). Notwithstanding the criticism, it is generally agreed that Venuti’s theory raises important issues regarding the influence of the socio-cultural context on translations and its relation to translation strategies applied in the process of translation (see Munday, 2001, p.155).

Literary Translation in US and UK

English holds strong position as the lingua franca of the modern world. To publish translated national literature in Anglo-American countries means to be heard by large audiences of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Although the numbers provided in different sources vary, it is estimated that English as a native, second and foreign language is spoken from 800 to 1500 million people around the world (McArthur, 2003, p.3). Minor countries experience difficulties while trying to enter the Anglo-American book

markets. This problem of closure for translations is acknowledged and discussed not only by European, i.e. non-English speaking countries, but also by US and UK.

A query in the UNESCO's *Index Translationum* on "the top 50 of most translated languages" ranks English in the first position (total of 1,000,758 translated books). On the other hand, search results for the evolution of translations in US and UK since 1990 show only approximate statistical data. For example, in 1990 the number of translated books is 227 in UK and 1835 in US, whereas in 2005, the data show only 1 translated book for both countries. Such inadequate numbers show that not all translations are being registered in the database. Still, *Index Translationum* is the only available official source which gives at least approximate numbers of translated books. Lea (*Lost: Translation*, 2007) notes that Britain, contrary to other European countries, does not produce statistics on translated books. Fuentes La Roche (*Literature in Translation: Why is it so Difficult to Enter the Anglo-American Market?*, 2008) also agrees that it is rather difficult to obtain information about LT as the UK Publisher's Association does not have data on it. As for the US case, the records on translated literature in 2008 and 2009 are available at Rochester University's translation database which can be freely accessed on the Internet. The database includes original translations of fiction and poetry published in the United States hoping that it will enable to identify how many different cultures and foreign authors are available to the English-speaking audience. The name of this database, which was launched in 2007, is *Three Percent*. The authors claim that it was named

"after the oft-cited statistic <...> that only 3% of books published in the U.S. are translations. We suspected that 3% number was a little high, but we had no way of confirming our suspicions – there were no real records of the number of translations published from year to year" (*Three Percent*, 2009).

The statistics for 2008 is 361 translations (none of them from Lithuanian). The assumption regarding the low LT status is further supported in a number of articles on book translation. For example, Rich (*Translation is Foreign to U.S. Publishers*, 2008) claims that in 2008, only 330 out of 15,000 works, or about 2% of released books in the US are translations; Fuentes La Roche (*Literature in Translation: Why is it so Difficult to Enter the Anglo-American Market?*, 2008) states that the available statistical data on translated books in the UK for 2004 is 1.8%; Lea (*Lost: Translation*, 2007) compares the UK situation against the other European countries saying that

"in Germany 13% of books are translations, <...> in Turkey 40% and in Slovenia 70%, but in Britain and America the best estimate suggest that the fraction of books on the shelves which started off in another language is somewhere around two per cent".

The LT numbers closely match the situation described in the work of Venuti (1999, p.88) published a decade ago:

Since World War II, English has remained the most translated language worldwide, but one of the least translated into. The translations issued by British and American publishers currently comprise about 2 and 4 percent of their total

output each year <...>. This asymmetry in translation patterns ensures that the United States and the United Kingdom enjoy a hegemony over foreign countries that is not simply political and economic, <...> but cultural as well.

Translators, journalists and other people interested in enhancing literary translation, mark multiple reasons which condition the prevalent lack of interest in foreign authors. The most often mentioned reason is bigger publishing costs than those of the book in the original language. It has to be admitted that a translated book involves additional expenses, but there are a lot of possibilities, especially provided by the European Union funds, to obtain partial or full financing (Fuentes La Roche, 2008; Lea, 2007). Subsidies can be obtained from several sources, for example, the country of the original book, UK or US cultural funds, and EU cultural funds (Dickens, 2007). For example, in Lithuania, a non-profit organization *Books from Lithuania* offers subsidies for translations of fiction, children's literature, culturally significant texts or publications in the humanities in order to promote the dissemination of Lithuanian literature worldwide. Foreign publishers are offered grants which partly or totally cover translation costs. Other myths advanced by publishers are that there are enough original English books, English language readers are not interested in translated fiction, translated books do not sell, translated books are inferior to originals, etc. (Fuentes La Roche, 2008; Lea, 2007; Rich, 2008; Dickens, 2007).

Summing up this discussion, the following words can be used to describe the mainstream attitude towards LT in the dominant countries: "I'm not going to see Hamlet because Shakespeare's not playing it" (Lea, 2007).

Literary Translation in Lithuania (1990-2008)

Having briefly overviewed tendencies of literary translation in the US and UK, the current section addresses the Lithuanian situation and attitudes by analyzing the available statistical data on translations, particularly those from and into the English language.

Translation of Foreign Literature into the Lithuanian Language

According to Mikutyte (*Lietuvos knygų statistika*, 2007), there is a steady growth of foreign literature translations into Lithuanian. Interestingly, translations even slightly outnumber the growth of Lithuanian literature publications; this tendency is evident from Figure 1 presented below:

Furthermore, in 2008, original works had visibly smaller average editions than translations. As Mikutyte (*Lietuvos spaudos statistika*, 2008) states, there is a general tendency of decreasing editions of books. In 1990, an average edition of one book was six times bigger (11,000 exemplars) than in 2008 (an average of 1,600 exemplars). The relevant numbers are given in Figure 2.

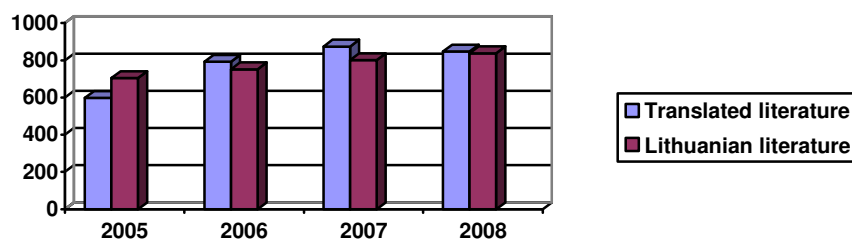


Figure 1. Relation of translations and original literature (2005-2008)

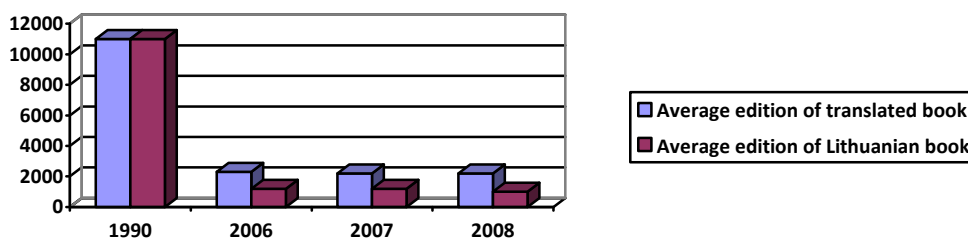


Figure 2. Average editions of translated and original literature

The available statistics for 2008 shows that American and British books make up 49% (418 books) of all translated literature. The situation was similar in 2007 as Anglo-American literature comprised 41%, whereas in 2006 it was 36%. Table 1 clearly demonstrates the visible dominance of US and UK books over other languages:

Table 1. Languages from which translations were made (2006-2008)

Translated languages	Number of books 2006	Number of books 2007	Number of books 2008
English (US)	146	190	236
English (UK)	138	167	182
German	89	95	82
French	60	80	52
Russian	46	44	38
Italian	13	26	18
Polish	22	21	10
Swedish	17	19	17
Aus English	10	17	9
Irish English	8	16	13
Norwegian	14	13	13
Spanish	10	12	8
Japanese	4	11	4
Finnish	6	10	11
Latvian	8	7	4
Other

The data show that, in contrast to the unwillingness to translate foreign literature in the US and UK, Lithuania is open for translations from a wide range of both, dominant and minor countries/ cultures.

Lithuanian Literature Translated into the English Language

Although the statistical information about Lithuanian literature in translation provided on the Internet at <http://www.booksfromlithuania.lt> is not complete, it is claimed to be the most exhaustive and regularly updated information of this type. The author of the paper added only two items to the provided list of the translated literature as they were not on it (*Folktales from Lithuania* (2007) and *Lithuanian Mythological Tales* (2002)). In the mentioned website, the translated Lithuanian literature is grouped into three categories: (1) books by individual authors, (2) anthologies by various authors, and (3) extracts or full translations published in periodicals. We will not discuss translations of Lithuanian literature published in periodicals but will focus on the other two categories.

Books and anthologies in English make up 19% of translated Lithuanian literature from the period of 1990-2008. To be more specific, 79 out of 409 works are publications in English. Although 19% do not seem to be a high index at first sight, the situation changes when we compare the numbers of translated books into other languages. It turns out that English is once again in the leading position outnumbering a variety of major and minor cultures (see Table 2). The results for the other most popular languages show certain similarities in both translation directions. For example, German and Russian remain on top of the list regarding literature translated into and from Lithuanian (see Table 1).

Table 2. Languages into which Lithuanian literature is translated (1990-2008)

Language	Number of books
English	79
German	64
Russian	42
Latvian	34
Polish	33
Swedish	21
French	19
Italian	16
Estonian, Spanish	8 (for each language)
Hungarian	6
Croat	5
Ukrainian	4
Belorussian, Japanese, Greek	3 (for each language)
Danish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Albanian, Turkish	2 (for each language)
Catalan, Icelandic, Slovenian, Finnish, Czech, Hungarian, Slovak, other.	1 (for each language)

Having in mind the previously discussed difficulties of entering the Anglo-American book market, on the one hand, and high numbers of Lithuanian books translated into English on the other, a question might be asked about the target audiences and publishers. Put in other words, who publishes and reads Lithuanian literature in English? Out of 79 translated books, more than half (44) were published in Lithuania by a great variety of publishing houses, such as *Kitos knygos*, *Klaipėda House of Artists*, *Vaga*, *Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla*, *Tvermė*, *Versus Aureus*, *Artseria*, *Baltos lankos*, *Jotema*, *Saulės delta*, *Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO*, *Tyto Alba* and *Balta varnelė*, to mention some. Such diversity of publishers shows active interest in spreading the native culture and literature abroad. However, it also indicates that the primary market for the Lithuanian books translated into English is European rather than Anglo-American audiences (Jonikaitė, 2008). It is rather doubtful that a book published in Lithuania could be found in an American or British book store, which suggests that such translations reach academic societies and/or are read by emigrants of Lithuanian origin, especially those who no longer speak Lithuanian, rather than native English speakers. This claim can be further supported by listing the publishers of some of the Lithuanian books in English, namely: *Vydūno fondas* in Chicago, *Elena Gaputyte Trust* in Oxford or *Lithuanian Papers* in Sandy Bay. The rest of the books were published by American and British (22) and other foreign publishers (10). A small investigation on these publishers by visiting their official websites allowed me

grouping them into several types (see Table 3). It turned out that Lithuanian literature is mostly published by university publishing houses and non-profit publishers who do not take any risks if the book does not sell. Some of such publishers are the *Poetry Society and Bloodaxe Books* from the UK and *University of Illinois Press*, *Northwestern University Press* and the *Sheep Meadow Press* from the US. To give another example, 11 out of 17 books printed in the US were published by noncommercial establishments. Authors selected by noncommercial publishers tend to be established authorities within as well as beyond the borders of Lithuania, such as Jonas Mekas or Icchokas Meras. However, although commercial, these publishers do not represent the market mainstream, but are rather minor or experimental institutions. For example, the *Black Thistle Press* which has published several works by Jonas Mekas presents itself as “a small independent press specializing in non-fiction and poetry” (*Black Thistle Press*, 1997).

Table 3. Publishers of Lithuanian literature translated into English

Books by foreign publishers	US	17
	UK	5
	Europe	5
	Lithuanian emigration	3
	Other (Russia, Canada, Australia)	5
	Total number	35
Books by Lithuanian publishers		44

Finally, the growth of Lithuanian LT into English since 1990 was looked at. The books were grouped according to their release date (see Figure 3). With the exception of 2002, only a slight increase in published translations can be observed (compare 1 book in 1990 and 6 books in 2008). However, the number jumps to 24 books in 2002. This divergence can be explained by the fact that in 2002 Lithuania was the principal invited guest to the Frankfurt Book Fair which is “the most important market-place for books, media, rights and licenses worldwide” with more than “7,300 exhibitors from 100 countries, 299,000 visitors and over 10,000 journalists” (*Frankfurt Book Fair*, 2009). The book fair might be compared to a springboard for the spread of the Lithuanian culture and literature. In 2001, *The World Press Review* published an article in which it was claimed that

“Lithuanian literature is little known abroad. That may change now that the Frankfurt Book Fair has named Lithuania a partner country for 2002” (Lucius, 2001).

There were no drastic changes after the Frankfurt book fair of 2001; however, a slight but steady progress rise in Lithuanian literary translations into English can be observed.

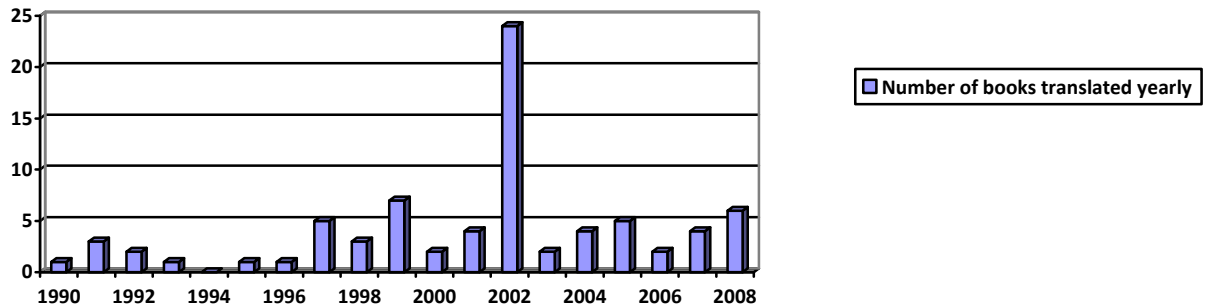


Figure 3. The growth of translated books into the English language 1990-2008

Final Remarks

The present article focused on literary translation in Lithuania, a minor country, contrasted to the globally dominant US and UK. The analyzed statistical data on literary translation from and into Lithuanian allows us to make the following observations:

- With respect to foreign literature translation, Lithuania is open for translations from a wide range of both, dominant and minor cultures/ countries. Moreover, there is a steady growth of translated literature which outnumbers books written in Lithuanian in amount and exemplars. The majority of translated books come from the dominant countries, the US and UK.
- As to the Lithuanian literary translation into other languages, English translations of Lithuanian books dominate, although they are more oriented at European rather than Anglo-American audiences.
- Books translated into English are generally published by Lithuanian or foreign non-profit publishers rather than commercial establishments. This fact speaks for invisibility of Lithuanian literature for the native English speakers.
- A slight increase in the number of Lithuanian books translated into English since 1990 is conditioned by the attempts of Lithuanian publishers rather than interest of the English speaking countries.

Indeed, the historically developed domination and exclusiveness of the Anglo-American countries and the worldwide spread of the English language and culture probably is a reason why English publishers do not see a great need in translating literature of other, especially minor, cultures. At the same time, translation is crucial for cross-cultural understanding and tolerance of "otherness" and, ideally, should become a primary concern of modern society. At present, however, it is the problem of a minor country to translate and publish its literary production with the hope of being heard.

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Literatūros vertimai anglo-amerikietiška ir lietuviška kontekstuose (1990–2008)

Santrauka

Lietuvos politinė, kultūrinė, ekonominė įtaka kitoms šalims, lyginant su tokiomis anglakalbėmis milžinėmis kaip Jungtinės Amerikos valstijos ar Didžioji Britanija, yra maža. Lietuviškos kultūros sklaida svarbi šalies įvaizdžio formavimui. Vienas iš kultūros perteikimo būdų svečioms šalims yra vertimas, dažnai įvardijamas kaip tiltas, jungiantis skirtingus pasaulius ir mąstymus. Vertimas supažindina skaitytoją su jam svetimos šalies kultūra, gyvenimu, papročiais, formuoja tam tikrus stereotipus. Grožinės lietuvių autorių literatūros vertimą į anglų kalbą galima įvardinti kaip kultūrinį eksportą, pristatantį Lietuvą anglakalbiams skaitytojams. Nors kultūrinio vertimo tema yra įdomi ir populiaru užsienio tyrinėtojų darbuose, lietuviška kontekste jai kol kas dar nėra skirta pakankamai dėmesio. Taigi, straipsnyje bandoma (1) apžvelgti meninio vertimo situaciją JAV ir Didžiojoje Britanijoje – dviejose dominuojančiose valstybėse; (2) ištirti meninio vertimo raidą (iš ir į anglų kalbą) Lietuvoje nuo 1990 metų. Teorinis darbo pagrindas remiasi Lawrence Venuti (1995) kultūrinio vertimo teorija, kuri kritikuoja egocentrinį dominuojančių valstybių požiūrį į verstinę, ypač mažųjų šalių, literatūrą. Duomenys apie grožinės literatūros vertimų statistiką JAV ir Didžiojoje Britanijoje gauti iš UNESCO tarptautinės vertimų bibliografijos (UNESCO's Index Translationum) tinklalapio. Informacija apie literatūrinį vertimą Lietuvoje gauta iš Lietuvos literatūros vertėjų sąjungos ir nepelno siekiančios organizacijos „Lietuviška knyga“ internetinių tinklalapių. Paaiškėjo, kad Amerikos ir Anglijos leidėjai nesidomi mažųjų šalių literatūra. Verstos knygos sudaro nežymią leidybos dalį (3%), tuo tarpu Lietuvoje vertimai viršija lietuvių autorių kūrybą ne tik skaičiumi, bet ir tiražais. Daugiausiai verčiama iš ir į anglų kalbą. Vis tik, vertimai į anglų daugiau skirti ne JAV ar Anglijos, bet Europos rinkai ar Lietuvos išeivijai: knygos leidžiamos daugiausiai lietuviškų arba nepelno siekiančių užsienio leidyklų. Nepaisant to, kad nesame tokie patrauklūs JAV ar Didžiosios Britanijos komercinėms leidykloms kaip norėtųsi, lietuviškos literatūros vertimų skaičius į anglų kalbą nuo nepriklausomybės atgavimo kyla aukštyn.

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