

Small publishers increasingly important for translated literature, researcher says

December 4 2023



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Over the period 1970–2016, small publishing houses became increasingly important for the publication of literature in translation in Sweden. More than ever, Nobel laureates are being published by relatively small independent publishers. A specialization in translations often stems from a publisher's personal interest in a language or

geographical area. These conclusions are drawn in a doctoral thesis submitted at Uppsala University.

"It's remarkable how quickly the small publishers became major actors for translated literature in the Swedish book market. Between 1978 and 1997, ten future recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature were introduced in Swedish translation by a small publishing house founded after 1975."

"This is an important factor to consider since publishing these authors before they are awarded the Nobel Prize entails a greater financial risk for a [publisher](#) than after the prize when publication can be associated with prestige and guaranteed attention," says Jana Rüegg, Doctor in literature, Uppsala University.

Many new publishing houses were founded after the introduction of state subsidies for literature in 1975, and several of them rapidly became essential, specifically for translations. Another wave of newly established small publishers has entered the market since the beginning of the 21st century. They have taken on a vital role in the publication of translations in Sweden, particularly from significant languages such as French, German, and Spanish.

In the years around 2010, several large publishers experienced [financial crises](#), which led them to let go of translated authors whom other publishers were then able to take over, as the thesis shows. The small publishers have also influenced the selection of authors translated into Swedish.

"Over the period 1970–2000, numerous editions of works primarily by male writers were published, translated from the major languages French, German and Spanish. This was partly because of the very extensive publication of classics, which are a type of literature associated

in this context with male authors such as Jules Verne, Franz Kafka, or Marcel Proust," says Rüegg.

Her research shows that small publishers founded in the 21st century have played an enormously important role in the publication of translations of works by female writers from French, German, and Spanish. After 2005, the gap narrowed; around 40 percent of published translations from those three languages have female authors.

The thesis consists of two parts.

The first part, *Nobelbanor (Nobel Trajectories)*, studies translated Nobel laureates in literature between 1970 and 2016 on the Swedish book market and whether they were published before or after the Nobel Prize. The study is based on a dataset of all editions of these authors in Swedish translation up to 2017.

To a large extent, the 45 Nobel Prize laureates were available in Swedish translation before the prize. The fact that 49 percent of them were published in paperback editions before being awarded the prize shows that the publishers saw a potential demand for large editions of these authors. On average, 20 years pass between the first Swedish translation and the Nobel Prize, which means that in many cases, the Nobel Prize reawakens an interest in an author who has been forgotten by the Swedish book market since their first introduction.

Over time, there has been a clear migration from larger to smaller publishers in the publication of translated Nobel laureates.

The second part of the thesis, *Förmedla och förlägga (Transmit and Publish)*, focuses on translations from French, German, and Spanish published by Swedish publishers between 1970 and 2016. The study is based on a dataset of all fiction editions for adults translated from the

three languages in Sweden from 1970 to 2016.

Over time, the number of translations from French and German has decreased and towards the end of the period studied, these translations were increasingly published by small niche publishers rather than large publishing houses. Translations from Spanish follow a different pattern because it was not until the 1980s that Swedish publishers seriously began publishing translations from that language, including big names such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende.

Large publishers continue to publish translations from Spanish to a greater extent, even towards the end of the period studied. According to Rüegg, the historical status of the languages in the Swedish book market clearly plays a role in determining what is translated and published.

"In French and German, there is a long tradition of publication in Sweden, and here we find translations from a wide range of genres, from classics and Nobel laureates to popular fiction. Translations from Spanish do not have such a long tradition of publication in the Swedish book market, which has led to very few Spanish-language classics being translated and published and also to relatively limited publication of popular Spanish-language [literature](#) in [translation](#) during this period," Rüegg concludes.

More information: Publishing Translations: Flows, Patterns, and Power-Dynamics in the Swedish Book Market after 1970: uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1804720&dswid=-7944

Provided by Uppsala University

Citation: Small publishers increasingly important for translated literature, researcher says (2023,

December 4) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-small-publishers-important-literature.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.