

The international circulation of Dutch literature from Flanders

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1. Introduction

Despite a recent surge of new research focused on the people, institutions and market dynamics that help propel Dutch literature around the world (see Bevers *et al.* 2015; Brems *et al.* 2017; D'haen 2019; van den Braber *et al.* 2021), little scholarly attention has been directed specifically to literature travelling from Flanders. By and large, researchers either focus on the Netherlands only, leaving Flanders and other literary cultures in the Dutch-speaking world out of the analysis, or adopt a case-based methodology, highlighting the international careers of a selection of individual works or authors from Flanders and the Netherlands but sidestepping any systematic analysis. By focusing on the situation in Flanders, my aim is not to underwrite the emancipatory claims of Flemish nationalists or aggravate tensions between Flemish and Dutch literary exporters. Rather, it is simply to better understand how power asymmetries both external and internal to a language (in our case, Dutch) are reflected in literary transfer *from* that language to other languages.

Providing an answer obliges us to frame book translations from Dutch within the transnational literary field in which they emerge and circulate. Elsewhere, I have attempted this in different ways: by analysing outgoing translation flows from Dutch (McMartin 2020); by scrutinising Flemish cultural policy as it relates to promoting literature by Flemish authors abroad (McMartin 2019a; McMartin 2019b), and by retracing the international travels of a book by a Flemish author that had success abroad (McMartin & Gentile 2020). In this contribution, I take a slightly different tack. I will explore and contextualise three aspects that illustrate telling dynamics involved in the international circulation of Dutch literature from Flanders: (1) exophony (the practice of writing or publishing in a language that is not one's own), (2) (non)reception abroad, with

particular attention to the (dominant) anglophone, francophone and germanophone spheres, and (3) unequal power relations *within* the Dutch-language publishing field. These three aspects can be taken as both indicators of and contributors to the uphill battle many Flemish authors and publishers face when trying to gain access to the world of translation publishing.

2. Exophonic authors and publishers

Translation is the dominant mode by which literature crosses borders, and multilingualism is a necessary condition for participating in the world literary arena. This is especially the case for internationally oriented authors and publishers working in smaller languages like Dutch, for whom translation is “a lamentable necessity”, to quote famous words by Danish critic and author Georg Brandes (2013 [1899], 63). This is not always the case for authors working in dominant literatures like English, French and German, which have many tens of millions of native speakers and significant numbers of second-language speakers. Indeed, a language’s appeal to non-native speakers is a primary measure for determining a language’s relative dominance over others:

A language is dominant if (and only if) it is a second language used by bilinguals or polyglots around the world. It is not the number of speakers that determines whether it is dominant or not (otherwise, Mandarin would be the dominant language). The criterion is, rather, the number of plurilingual speakers who ‘choose’ it. (Casanova & Jones 2013, 380)

Among these bilinguals and polyglots are some exophonic authors from dominated languages who ‘choose’ to write and publish directly in a dominant literary language in the hope of finding more readers and recognition. Beckett (Irish-French), Nabokov (Russian-English), Kerouac (Québécois-English) and Conrad (Polish-English) are famous examples of authors whose literary careers flourished after adopting a dominant language. Not all exophonic authors are so lucky. Gerard Reve, to give an example from the Dutch field, tried writing in English for several years but never broke through (see Raat 2000, 190-196).

For its part, Flanders has a long tradition of a particular type of exophonic author: self-translators. Self-translation simultaneously constitutes a conceptual blind spot and a hotspot because it defies a straightforward application of the dominant/dominated dichotomy described above and situates the loci of language politics within a single individual working simultaneously in two or more literary cultures. In the words of Reine Meylaerts, who has studied self-translation in multilingual Belgium extensively:

Writing and/or self-translating in the dominant language certainly offers visibility and literary prestige but, especially in situations where the minority cultures are struggling for their linguistic emancipation, it is easily perceived by the minority groups as a treachery towards the minority language and literature, supporting the prestige and dominance of the majority language and literature. Instead, writing and/or self-translating in the minority language is perceived by the majority groups as an attack against their linguistic and literary supremacy. Whenever hierarchies are outspoken, multilingual writers and self-translators risk having a hard life.

(Meylaerts 2013, 524)

The risk of a hard life notwithstanding, 19th- and 20th-century Flemish self-translators overwhelmingly worked between Dutch and French and were oriented toward Paris. Most were either educated in French at schools in Flanders, or raised in bilingual, Dutch/French households. Notable self-translators from Flanders include Georges Eekhoud (1854 – 1927) (see Gonne 2017), Cyriel Buysse (1859 – 1932) and later Camille Melloy (1892 – 1941), Roger Avermaete (1893 – 1988), Johan Daisne (pseudonym of Herman Thierry, 1912 – 1978), and Marnix Gijsen (pseudonym of Jan-Albert Goris, 1899 – 1984), who also had strong ties with the anglophone cultural sphere as director, from 1942 to 1964, of the Belgian Government Information Center in New York (see Brems 2016). Many of these self-translators also actively translated works by other authors, mediating in both directions between Flemish and francophone cultural spheres.

Interestingly, the two most prolific Flemish self-translators of the 21st century work between Dutch and English, not Dutch and French: Paul Verhaeghen, who self-translates from Dutch to English, and Chika Unigwe, who self-translates from English to Dutch but whose works appear first in Dutch translation. Verhaeghen translated his 614-page magnum opus *Omega Minor* (J.M. Meulenhoff 2004) into English in 2007 (Dalkey Archive Press) and won the Independent Fiction Prize for his efforts a year later. Unigwe, a Nigerian-Flemish author now living in the United States, writes in English and self-translates into Dutch. Like Verhaeghen, she has also had success in both languages. She debuted in 2005 with *De feniks* (Meulenhoff/Manteau), which was published first in Dutch, then in English as *The Phoenix* (Farafina 2007). The same method was used for her next two novels, *Fata Morgana* (Manteau 2007), published in English as *On Black Sisters' Street* (Jonathan Cape 2009), and *Nachtdanser* (De Bezige Bij Antwerpen 2011), published in English as *Night Dancer* (Jonathan Cape 2011) (see Codina Solà 2021).

The gradual disappearance of Dutch-French self-translators and the arrival of Dutch-English self-translators in Flanders underwrite a larger power

shift in the transnational literary field away from French, which held undisputed dominance in the 18th and 19th centuries as the second language of choice, and towards English, which overtook French in the 1970s and has only consolidated its dominance since then (Casanova & Jones 2013, 381). The shift from French to English also reflects changing intra-state power dynamics within Belgium, which has gradually become culturally and politically divided into two largely separate Flemish and francophone spheres. This is part and parcel of the gradual devolution of cultural policy and media regulation frameworks from the federal to the language community level as a result of the federalisation of the Belgian state since the 1980s. Much in the same way that Flanders and the Netherlands have developed separate mediascapes, so too have Flanders and francophone Belgium. Each of these mediascapes have become less receptive to one another and more receptive (to a greater or lesser extent) to English.

The dominance of English also manifests in the wider field of translation publishing. English is a prerequisite for an international literary career: readings abroad, interviews with foreign journalists, and interactions with foreign (both anglophone and other) publishers often take place in English. Source and target publishers and the rights managers, acquisition editors and literary agents that negotiate book deals on their behalf overwhelmingly use English to do business. Furthermore, because acquisitions editors rarely read Dutch or have colleagues who do, Flemish and Dutch publishers must rely on English sample translations when pitching titles for translation. If the sample (usually the complete first chapter) piques interest, editors either hire someone with knowledge of Dutch and Dutch literature (often a translator) to read the whole book and produce a reader's report or seek out a full translation in a language they can read, if one is available. In both cases, editors are reliant on translations when making acquisition decisions. It is for this reason that Dutch and Flemish publishers and the two literature foundations representing the Netherlands and Flanders abroad (the Dutch Foundation for Literature and Flanders Literature, respectively) invest in English sample translations, often splitting the costs between them: without strong sample translations, many titles from Dutch would never leave the pitch meeting. In this way, English can be seen as an important relay language – and English samples as an important indirect translation practice – in the chain linking (non-anglophone) source and target publishing fields.

This brings us to a related strategy used by Flemish (and Dutch) publishers to overcome the dominance of English: 'in-house' translation. That is, instead of selling translation rights to an anglophone publisher and collecting royalties as they normally would, publishers simply publish their own authors in translation themselves and distribute the books with a distributor in the English-

speaking world. The motivation behind this strategy is not unlike that of exophonic authors who choose to write in a dominant language: by publishing translations in-house, publishers in dominated languages gain access to a much larger economic and symbolic marketplace. They also bypass the notoriously impermeable gatekeepers guarding anglophone markets (i.e., anglophone publishers).

Among Flemish and Dutch publishers, in-house translation into English is particularly common in the genre of children's literature: Clavis, based in Hasselt, and Lemniscaat, based in Rotterdam, each have English-language imprints in New York. The Amsterdam-based mixed-list publisher Querido publishes in-house translations of a selection from its bestselling *Jip en Janneke* ('Jip and Janneke') series in English as well. In April 2019, Querido announced it was teaming up with Arthur A. Levine to create Levine Querido, an independent firm under Levine's leadership with a list of Dutch and international titles as well as English-authored titles. Levine is a well-respected children's book editor who left Scholastic, a leading conglomerate publisher of children's literature in the US, after more than two decades.

In-house translation was also observed in the fiction genre: World Editions, the English imprint of De Geus, the Breda-cum-Amsterdam-based publisher of mostly immigrant and international authors, has published many titles from the De Geus list in English. I even encountered one non-anglophone publisher who sought (unsuccessfully) to buy English rights for a Flemish title: the Italian independent literary publisher Edizioni E/O (the publisher of Elena Ferrante in Italian and English). Edizioni E/O attempted to secure both Italian and English rights for Lize Spit's successful debut novel *Het smelt* (Das Mag 2016), succeeding only in the former. It published *Si scioglie* in 2017. English rights for *Het smelt* are owned by Picador, of Pan Macmillan. The English translation by Kristen Gehrman, *The Melting*, was published in 2021.

3. The international (non)reception of Dutch literature from Flanders

Another measure of a language's dominance is the extent to which books translated from that language are reviewed and revered by foreign critics. The sociologist Nico Wilterdink, one of the few researchers who takes a global (rather than case-based) view when studying the reception of Dutch literature abroad, summarised how Dutch literature has been received by foreign newspaper critics in the last few decades thus:

A recurrent observation is that [Dutch] literature is largely unknown outside the Dutch-speaking population and does not play any significant

role in the rest of the world. Sometimes it is added [...] that this is beginning to change. (Wilterdink 2017, 46)

Comparing critical reception in German, French, British and American newspapers, Wilterdink finds that only German critics can be said to show an appetite for and knowledge of Dutch literature. This he ascribes to a relatively strong German interest in Dutch society and culture in general and to the interconnected conditions of “geographical proximity, strong trade and business relations, frequent cross-border traffic and migration, and the similarities of language” (Wilterdink 2017, 55). Indeed, more Dutch books are published in German translation than in any other language, and they tend to sell better there than elsewhere. According to Wilterdink, the German-speaking world is also the only space outside the Low Countries where *individual* Dutch and Flemish authors have attained status as public literary personalities in their own right. Foremost among them is Cees Nooteboom, whose reputation in Germany arguably eclipses his reputation at home (Wilterdink 2015, 117-121). Several observers have traced Nooteboom’s success in German and the success of Dutch literature in Germany more generally back to the 1993 Frankfurt Book Fair, where Flanders and the Netherlands jointly presented as guests of honour for the first time (Heilbron & van Es 2015, 48; Missinne 2018, 11-31; Ross 2021). The joint guest of honour presentation of Flanders and the Netherlands at Frankfurt in 2016 represents an effort to stimulate a second wave of interest in Dutch literature in Germany and, via Germany, the world (McMartin 2021).

The reception of Dutch literature in France, Britain and the United States differ one from the other but all share the same common bottom line: by and large, journalists and critics in these countries have a superficial interest in Dutch literature at best. In France, Wilterdink (2017) reports a tendency to view Dutch literature as ‘Northern European’, hence locating the Low Countries nearer to Stockholm than to Paris. According to Paola Gentile (2021), this was also the case for critics in Italy. In the English-speaking world, Dutch literature tended to be transmogrified one level higher, into ‘European’ or even simply ‘foreign’ literature, emphasising a perceived difference in taste between Anglo-Saxon, ‘empirical’ literary norms and European ‘philosophical and reflexive’ ones (Wilterdink 2017, 53). This rhetorical dislocation serves to reiterate the dominance of English and the impermeability of its literary borders, a view epitomised by a critic for *The Observer*, as quoted by Wilterdink (2017, 53): “The awkward fact is that, though we buy ever-increasing quantities, we have a small appetite for new [books] by writers with funny names. Our own literature provides, we believe, all the satisfaction we need.”

So where does Flanders fit in studies on the international reception of Dutch literature? Simply put, it doesn't really. Wilterdink does not include Flemish authors in his various analyses except to note that Hugo Claus, the most famous and probably most important Flemish writer of the post-war period, is often incorrectly referred to as an author from the Netherlands (Wilterdink 2017, 60). Almost without exception, foreign critics do not make a distinction between authors from Flanders and authors from the Netherlands.¹ It could very well be that this is due to confusion about when to use 'Flemish' and when to use 'Dutch' when discussing literature from the Low Countries. Often, this confusion can be traced back to the erroneous assumption among reviewers and critics that Flemish is a language separate from Dutch. (Authors from Flanders write in Dutch. Dutch literature, at least as I use the term here, includes all literature written in Dutch.) A book from Flanders may of course be described as 'typically Flemish', or one might refer to 'Flemish literature' when describing books from Flanders, but a book cannot be written *in* Flemish because Flemish, strictly speaking, is not a language. According to Michiel Scharpé, a former grant manager at Flanders Literature, this confusion is shared by foreign publishers, too. Clearing it up was a big part of his job:

We *still* have to explain it to publishers! These are people who work in publishing, in language, whose job it is to seek out interesting titles in other countries. That is their job. We now have a leaflet to give out [when they ask], "yeah, what's the deal with Flemish and Dutch, same language, same translators?" They just don't know. I even get publishers who have published lots of books from the Netherlands and finally decide to do one of ours [from Flanders], and then they ask, "yeah, but do you have translators? Because we don't have any for Flemish." And then you have to explain it again: you can use any Dutch translator you like. It's the same language. (Interviewed by McMartin, November 30, 2017)

Partly due to the Flemish/Dutch confusion, the organisation formerly known as the Flemish Literature Fund, whose old English name did little to clear

¹ Florence Noiville's May 23, 2018 feature in *Le Monde* reporting on Flanders and the Netherlands' joint appearance as invited guests at the 2018 *Comédie du Livre* (a yearly book fair in Montpellier) is one of the few articles of its kind to highlight the distinctions between authors from the Netherlands and Flanders. Three authors from Flanders made her list of notable Dutch-language authors (Hugo Claus, Stefan Hertmans, and David Van Reybrouck), alongside Hella Haasse, Harry Mulisch, Cees Nooteboom, Anna Enquist, and Arnon Grunberg from the Netherlands.

things up,² chose in March 2017 to re-brand itself in English as Flanders Literature. The new name both removes the possibility of confusing Flemish as a language and emphasises the organisation's territorial aspect as belonging to Flanders. (A similar strategy is used by Flanders Literature's Irish counterpart, Literature Ireland.)

Nonetheless, the disassociation between Flanders as a Dutch-speaking region and Flemish authors as belonging to Dutch literature continues to be perpetuated by foreign critics. An exhaustive list of all reviews in all languages of books from Flanders is beyond the scope of this article, however the anglophone critical reception of Stefan Hertmans' *Oorlog en terpentijn* (De Bezige Bij 2013), published as *War and Turpentine* (trans. David McKay) in English, easily the most widely-reviewed novel to emerge from Flanders over the last two decades, is instructive: in the 10 feature pieces and 23 'roundup' pieces that appeared in newspapers in the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia, only 5 (!) acknowledged that Hertmans' novel was translated out of Dutch. Nor was there consensus among reviewers about how to describe Hertmans' nationality. He is identified variously as 'Belgian' (14 mentions), 'Flemish' (11 mentions), and 'Flemish Belgian' (2 mentions). Six articles do not assign him a nationality or any other identifier beyond 'author'.

To gain a better idea of which authors and books from Flanders are being read and reviewed by foreign readers, we can also look at another kind of reception document: the translated books themselves. (For a discussion of translation as reception, see Brems & Ramos Pinto 2013.) Let us turn briefly to the most-translated authors and titles from Flanders for the period 1998-2018. The figures presented here were consolidated from the publicly available translation database maintained by the Dutch Foundation for Literature in cooperation with Literature Flanders, the most robust source of bibliographic data on literature translated from Dutch available for the period under study.³

As shown in Table 1, topping the list of Flanders' most-translated authors are three working in the genre of children's literature: Guido van Genechten, whose *Rikki* ('Ricky') series of picture books is a worldwide bestseller, his fellow Clavis author and illustrator Liesbet Slegers, and the young adult fiction author Bart Moeyaert, who in 2019 won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the most prestigious international prize for children's literature. Moeyaert is followed by the poet and novelist Hugo Claus, who, as mentioned, is widely considered to be the most important writer from Flanders of the twentieth century. Claus'

² The former name of the organisation in Dutch, *Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren*, was less ambiguous; rendered literally, that is 'Flemish Foundation for Literature'. The new Dutch-language name for the organisation is *Literatuur Vlaanderen* ('Flanders Literature').

³ <https://letterenfonds.secure.force.com/vertalingendatabase/search>

monumental Second World War novel, *Het verdriet van België* ('The Sorrow of Belgium') (De Bezige Bij 1983) carries the hefty label "The Greatest Classic in Flemish Literature" in Flanders Literature's branding materials and is among the most widely translated books from Flanders, as shown in Table 2. Claus is joined by two other authors from the Flemish canon: Willem Elsschot, whose novella *Kaas* ('Cheese') (latest edition by Polis 2017, originally published by Kampen 1933) is the most-translated book from Flanders in the database (see De Man 2016), and Louis Paul Boon, whose expansive oeuvre includes historical epics, progressive social histories, erotic fiction, and a body of journalistic work.

As for contemporary authors, a handful have found their way to publishers' lists abroad: Dimitri Verhulst was the most-translated Flemish fiction author for the period under study. His novels *De helaasheid der dingen* ('The Misfortunates') (Atlas Contact 2006) and *Problemski Hotel* ('Problemski Hotel') (Atlas Contact 2003) both appear among the top-10 most-translated books from Flanders (see Brems *et al.* 2017). Stefan Hertmans, whose oeuvre spans fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and travel literature, has had tremendous international success with *Oorlog en terpentijn* ('War and Turpentine') (De Bezige Bij 2013), also among the most-translated titles. That success seems to have anchored him in the lists of some of the world's most prestigious publishers (notably, Gallimard in French and Harvill Secker in English), which have not only acquired the novels that followed *Oorlog en terpentijn – De bekeerlinge* ('The Convert') (De Bezige Bij 2016) and *De opgang* ('The Ascent') (De Bezige Bij 2020) – but have also begun publishing translations of his earlier works as well. Other notable authors of literary fiction whose books have travelled beyond Flanders include Annelies Verbeke, whose international bestseller *Slaap!* ('Sleep!') (De Geus 2003) is one of the most-translated books from Flanders, Erwin Mortier, Peter Terrin, Stefan Brijs, Diane Broeckhoven and the experimentalist Peter Verhelst. In the genre of non-fiction, David Van Reybroeck has distinguished himself internationally with *Congo* ('Congo') (De Bezige Bij 2010) and *Tegen verkiezingen* ('Against Elections') (De Bezige Bij 2013), both of which have been widely translated. Lieve Joris takes up a place as the Flemish counterpart to Cees Nooteboom in the genre of travel literature. Although not among the most-translated authors, the Flemish poet, diarist and translator Leonard Nolens (14 translated titles) has also garnered praise from international critics.⁴ Among the younger generation of widely translated Flemish authors are Lize Spit, whose debut novel *Het smelt* ('The Melting') (Das Mag 2016) has already been mentioned, and graphic novelist

⁴ A very small selection of Nolens' work has only recently entered English: *An English Anthology* (Carcenet, trans. Paul Vincent) appeared in 2018.

Brecht Evens, whose work *Het amusement* ('The City of Belgium') (Oogachtend 2018) won the 2019 Prix Spécial du Jury Angoulême.

Author(s) name	Children's Literature	Fiction	Graphic novel / Comic	Non-fiction	Poetry	Travel Literature	Total
van Genechten, Guido	176						176
Slegers, Liesbet	87						87
Moeyaert, Bart	83				1		84
Claus, Hugo		54			13		67
Minne, Brigitte	62						62
Timmers, Leo	61						61
Robberecht, Thierry	46		13				59
Verhulst, Dimitri		59					59
Vanden Heede, Sylvia	49						49
de Bel, Marc	48						48
Elsschot, Willem		39			2		41
Hertmans, Stefan		25		3	9	4	41
Aspe, Pieter		39					39
Joris, Lieve				7		30	37
Boonen, Stefan	32		1				33
De Kockere, Geert	32						32
Provoost, Anne	31	1					32
Verbeke, Annelies		32					32
Berebrouckx, Annemie	31						31
van Reybrouck, David				27		3	30
Amant, Kathleen	29						29
Mortier, Erwin		29					29
Verplancke, Klaas	28						28
Terrin, Peter		27					27
Lauryssens, Stan		18		8			26
Schamp, Tom	26						26
Brijs, Stefan		25					25
Broeckhoven, Diane	1	23					24
Goes, Peter	23						23
Droogenbroodt, Germain					22		22
Mortier, Tine	22						22
Baeten, Lieve	21						21
Schuurmans, Hilde	21						21
Vrancken, Kaat	19						19
Evens, Brecht			18				18
Boon, Louis Paul		17					17
de Leeuw, Jan	17						17
van Coillie, Jan	17						17
van Daele, Henri	17						17
Verhelst, Peter	9	8					17
Bie, Linne	16						16
van Mieghem, Linda	14		2				16
Verleyen, Karel	16						16

Table 1: Most-translated authors from Flanders, all genres (1998-2018; >15 titles). Source: Translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature

Kaas	Elsschot, Willem	Fiction	Van Kampen	22
Slaap!	Verbeke, Annelies	Fiction	De Geus	20
De helaasheid der dingen	Verhulst, Dimitri	Fiction	Contact	19
Rikki durft	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	18
Dali & I	Laurysens, Stan	Fiction	Van Halewyck	17
Oorlog en terpentijn	Hertmans, Stefan	Fiction	De Bezige Bij	15
De bewaker	Terrin, Peter	Fiction	De Arbeiderspers	14
De engelenmaker	Brijs, Stefan	Fiction	Atlas	14
Het grote billen-boek	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	14
Problemski Hotel	Verhulst, Dimitri	Fiction	Contact	14
Vos en Haas	Vanden Heede, Sylvia	Children's Lit	Lannoo	14
De buitenkant van meneer Jules	Broeckhoven, Diane	Fiction	Vianen: The House of Books	13
Tijdlijn	Goes, Peter	Children's Lit	Lannoo	13
De kabbalist	Kimpen, Geert	Fiction	De Arbeiderspers	11
Rikki	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	11
Het verdriet van België	Claus, Hugo	Fiction	De Bezige Bij	10
Mare en de dingen	Mortier, Tine	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	10
De geruchten	Claus, Hugo	Fiction	De Bezige Bij	9
Het geheim van de keel van de na..	Verhelst, Peter	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	9
Het smelt	Spit, Lize	Fiction	Das Mag	9
Klein wit visje	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	9
Allemaal willen we de hemel	Beerten, Els	Children's Lit	Querido	8
Garage Gust	Timmers, Leo	Children's Lit	Querido	8
Het grootste en leukste beeldwoo..	Schamp, Tom	Children's Lit	Lannoo	8
Kleine kangoeroe	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	8
Meneer René	Timmers, Leo	Children's Lit	Querido	8
Plotter wil niet zwemmen	Schuurmans, Hilde	Children's Lit	Clavis	8
Rood, of waarom pesten niet gra..	de Kinder, Jan	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	8
Toen papa koning was	Robberecht, Thierry	Children's Lit	Clavis	8
Tot kijk, Vos en Haas	Vanden Heede, Sylvia	Children's Lit	Lannoo	8
Appelmoes	Verplancke, Klaas	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	7
Broere	Moeyaert, Bart	Children's Lit	Querido	7
Cowboy Henk	Kamagurka, Herr Seele	Graphic novel	De Bezige Bij Antwerpen De Harmonie	4 3
De arkvaarders	Provoost, Anne	Children's Lit	Querido	7
De melkweg	Moeyaert, Bart	Children's Lit	Querido	7
De Midasmoorden	Aspe, Pieter	Fiction	J.M. Meulenhoff	7
De schepping	Moeyaert, Bart	Children's Lit	Querido	7
Het vierkant van de wraak	Aspe, Pieter	Fiction	Manteau	7
Lotje en de heksenprinses	Baeten, Lieve	Children's Lit	Clavis	7
Marcel	Mortier, Erwin	Fiction	J.M. Meulenhoff	7
Monte Carlo	Terrin, Peter	Fiction	De Bezige Bij	7
Sarah en haar spookjes	Robberecht, Thierry	Children's Lit	Clavis	7
Slaap lekker, Rosalie	Minne, Brigitte	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	7
Vos en Haas op het eiland	Vanden Heede, Sylvia	Children's Lit	Lannoo	7
Wie rijdt?	Timmers, Leo	Children's Lit	Clavis	7
Blote handen	Moeyaert, Bart	Children's Lit	Querido	6
De appel van Magritte	Verplancke, Klaas	Children's Lit	Lannoo	6
De knuffelkoningin	Aertssen, Kristien	Children's Lit	De Eenhoorn	6
De liefhebbers	Evens, Brecht	Graphic novel	Oogachtend	6
De maagd en de neger	Vanistendael, Judith	Graphic novel	De Harmonie	6
De roos en het zwijn	Provoost, Anne	Children's Lit	Querido	6
Ergens waar je niet wil zijn	Evens, Brecht	Graphic novel	Oogachtend	6
Feest voor Finn	Goes, Peter	Children's Lit	Lannoo	6
Groter dan een droom	Aerts, Jef	Children's Lit	Querido	6
Het is de liefde die we niet begrij..	Moeyaert, Bart	Children's Lit	Querido	6
Het kindje in de stal	Slegers, Liesbet	Children's Lit	Clavis	6
Onvoltooid verleden	Claus, Hugo	Fiction	De Bezige Bij	6
Rikki en zijn vriendjes	van Genechten, Guido	Children's Lit	Clavis	6

Table 2: Most-translated titles from Flanders, first editions only (1998-2018; > 5 titles). Source: Translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature

4. Unequal power relations within the Dutch-language publishing field

The constraints faced by authors and publishers from Flanders seeking to participate in the translation publishing world have as much to do with language politics *beyond* Dutch as they do with language politics *within* Dutch. Sociologists of literature have thus far tended not to delve into intralingual aspects when analysing cross-border literary transfer, preferring to foreground translation flows between languages and/or between clearly delineated nation states.⁵ This leaves the heteronational character of many of the world's literary languages – and the effect this reality can have on translation flows – obfuscated. Consequently, what are identified as translation flows between languages are actually translation flows generated from within largely national structures and import/export markets in unequal competition with one another. Any approach that seeks to understand how the literature of a single nation within a heteronational language area travels beyond that language must take into account the relations of dominance *within* a language area that help determine which books ultimately manage to cross its linguistic boundaries and circulate internationally.

The Dutch language area is a fruitful case in point because it defies clear-cut categories of nation, state, and language. Flanders, a small, stateless nation that has attained a measure of linguistic emancipation only recently, shares a language and a long, intermingled history with its larger neighbour the Netherlands, itself a prototypical nation state that has long fit the mould of 'one nation, one language' – to the extent that they share the same descriptor: 'Dutch'. This notwithstanding, discussions about relations of dominance between the Netherlands and Flanders in the realm of language politics have tended to focus on linguistic rather than literary (a)symmetries (De Caluwe 2012). In line with the political effort to standardise the dictionary and grammar across the two regions, the Dutch language is currently understood to be pluricentric (De Caluwe 2013). Lexicographically speaking, Flanders and the Netherlands are in balance: national linguistic variants are labelled in the dictionary in a way that both are given equal status. This ideology of Flemish-Dutch symmetry is given institutional expression in the *Taalunie* ('Dutch Language Union'), the treaty-based, intergovernmental organisation charged with determining what is and is not *Algemeen Nederlands* ('Standard Dutch').

To glean intralingual asymmetries at the literary level, we must look beyond the dictionary and explore how the book trade is organised in Flanders

⁵ An exception is Córdoba Serrano (2010), who examines literary export from Quebec in the context of asymmetric power relations within the French language area.

and the Netherlands. On the “About our book market” page of its website, Flanders Literature describes the Dutch-language book market thus:

Because they have a language in common, Flanders and the Netherlands also share a common book market. [...] And regardless of whether they are published by a Flemish or a Dutch publisher, books are generally distributed across the whole market. This also means some Flemish authors are published by Dutch publishers or the other way round.

(Flanders Literature 2021)

In reality, the book trade in the Dutch language area can more accurately be described as two interconnected yet largely inward-looking parallel markets that share a single distribution infrastructure. Furthermore, the Dutch market, with 16.6 million readers, is nearly three times larger than the Flemish market, with 6.2 million readers (Van Baelen 2013). (In total, the Dutch-language area has a readership of 22.8 million, making it the fifth largest in Europe.) This size differential is magnified by two additional factors: the strong position of cross-border media conglomerates based in Amsterdam that do business in both regions, and Flemish publishers’ dependence on the Centraal Boekenhuis (‘CB’) based in Culemborg, Netherlands, which distributes 95 percent of all books in Flanders and the Netherlands.

This information adds some perspective to Flanders Literature’s statement that “some Flemish authors are published by Dutch publishers or the other way round”, a characterisation which implies that production and reception circuits are two-directional and symmetrical between Flanders and the Netherlands. That is far from the case: data on the relative import and export of titles between Flanders and the Netherlands shows that the flow of titles within the Dutch language area is largely one-directional, from the Netherlands to Flanders. Sixty percent of titles on the market in Flanders are imported from the Netherlands (books produced by publishers in the Netherlands and sold in Flanders). Transfer in the opposite direction, from Flanders to the Netherlands, accounts for only five percent of titles available in the Netherlands. When narrowed down to ‘A-books’, a category that excludes schoolbooks and academic books, the disparity increases: around two thirds of all newly registered titles in Flanders were imported from the Netherlands. The intralingual trade imbalance is less extreme for children’s literature, graphic novels and comics, where the ‘domestic’ share of the Flemish publishers in the Flemish market is around fifty-five percent. However, in the genres of fiction and literary non-fiction, that number falls to just twelve percent. Clearly, Dutch

publishers hold a very dominant position in relation to their Flemish counterparts within the Dutch language area.⁶

It is for this reason that many Flemish authors, particularly those working in Dutch-dominated genres like fiction, see great value in finding a publisher in the Netherlands, and particularly in Amsterdam: by signing with a Dutch publisher, they secure both circulation in Flanders (since Dutch publishers are dominant there, too) and circulation in the Netherlands. Amsterdam-based publishers also tend to be seen as more prestigious than others in the Dutch language area, which adds a symbolic imperative as well. This does not necessarily mean that Flemish authors published by Dutch publishers are widely read in the Netherlands. Rather, readers in each region tend to limit themselves to authors that share their nationality. In other words, Dutch readers read Dutch (and international) authors and Flemish readers read Flemish (and international) authors. An analysis comparing the 50 top-selling titles for the years 2009-2012 in Flanders and the Netherlands respectively shows the extent of this bifurcation: in the Netherlands, half of the top-selling authors were Dutch, the other half were international authors published in Dutch translation. In Flanders, half of the top-selling authors were Flemish, the other half were international. (As for publisher nationality, the top-50 lists in the Netherlands consisted exclusively of books published by Dutch publishers; in Flanders, half were published by Flemish publishers and half by Dutch publishers.) When titles did find success in both markets, they tended to be Dutch titles traveling to Flanders: four titles by Dutch authors appeared in both Dutch and Flemish bestseller lists in the period under study. No Flemish title did the same.

5. Conclusion

This article sought to explore the uphill battle Flemish authors and publishers face when seeking access to the world of translation publishing. Three aspects were addressed: (1) exophony, or working directly in a second language, a strategy used by several Flemish authors and publishers to break into English and enjoy its symbolic and economic benefits; (2) the (non-)reception of literature by Flemish authors in other languages, which I linked, among other things, to confusion in the minds of foreign publishers and critics surrounding 'Flemish' as a descriptor and not a language; and (3) intralingual power asymmetries within the Dutch-language book market. This market is dominated by publishers in Amsterdam and bifurcated into readers in Flanders who prefer books by Flemish (and international) writers, and readers in the Netherlands who prefer books by

⁶ The figures cited in this paragraph reflect intralingual transfer for the year 2013. All statistics have been taken from Van Baelen (2013).

Dutch (and international) writers. For a Flemish author navigating this context, the appeal of finding a publisher in Amsterdam is threefold: wider distribution in the Dutch-language area, higher prestige, and a better shot at ‘breaching the dyke’ and launching an international career. In an international literary arena divided along national and linguistic boundaries and dominated by English, French and German, that career is contingent on translation. As the lists of most-translated books and authors from Flanders attest, only the lucky few succeed.

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