



Capturing an Elusive Truth— and Earning Recognition for It, Too

By Jill Timbers (with passages by Kersti Juva)

A literary translator in Finland was in the spotlight quite a bit last fall. In September 2008, Kersti Juva of Finland became the first translator ever to be appointed Artist Professor. The Arts Council of Finland stated that “appointing translator Kersti Juva to the position of Artist Professor is an excellent way to draw attention to the critical importance translated literature has had and continues to have on the development of Finnish literature. Literature in translation opens windows onto the whole world, onto everything written throughout human history, for all readers, regardless of their foreign language skills.”

On September 1, 2008, Juva and two other professionals—an architect and a choreographer—began five-year terms as Artist Professors. With the three new appointments, there are now 11 Artist Professors in Finland. During their five-year professorships, they will draw a monthly salary intended to further the pursuit of creative projects and interests. Juva jokes that since she has never held a “real job,” this is the first time she will have the luxury of a monthly salary.

Background

Juva translates from English into Finnish. In over 35 years as a literary translator, she has brought many classics into Finnish, as well as contemporary fiction, plays, and radio comedies. She has taught university and professional courses, organized

workshops, written about the practice of translation, and actively campaigned for professional recognition and rights for translators. She also created and moderates a Finnish-language Internet discussion list for literary translators.

Juva was born in 1948 into a world of books and thinking. Her grandfather, Einar Juva, was a professor and chancellor of the University of Turku. Her father, Mikko Juva, was a history professor at the universities of Turku and Helsinki, a member of the Finnish parliament, and, from 1978-82, the archbishop of Finland.

In her speech at the Artist Professor induction ceremony, Juva explained that in high school she fell in love with the Finnish language, its grammar, and its literature. She longed to write, but discovered that she had nothing to say! Then she entered the University of Helsinki, where a friend invited her to a class on translating. “Everything snapped into place,” Juva remembers. “An art form exists that matches my talents. A way exists to read and write at the same time. I do not need to have something of my own to say. I can be part of this group effort as both reader and writer, by saying what others have already said in another language.”

While still in her 20s, Juva was asked by her professor and mentor Eila Pennanen, a major Finnish novelist in her own right, to help translate J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy into Finnish. Juva and Pennanen worked together on the first

two volumes, and Juva was the sole translator for the third. So began a career of dizzying breadth, including the translation of such works as *Winnie the Pooh* (A.A. Milne); *The Wonderful World of Oz* (L. Frank Baum); *Bleak House* and *Nicholas Nickleby* (Charles Dickens); *Watership Down* (Richard Adams); *The Color Purple* (Alice Walker); *Washington Square* (Henry James); as well as classics by Tennessee Williams, Jayne Anne Philips, Oscar Wilde, Nadine Gordimer, Jhumpa Lahiri, Dick Frances, and William Shakespeare. Regarding her greatest translation achievement, Juva says it

covering long distances each day and sleeping in a tent. This past summer, she biked 600 miles through Sweden in two weeks.

Musings on the Art of Translation

The following is a scattering of excerpts drawn from Juva's essays and thoughts on her personal experience. They appear here with Juva's permission.

What Does a Translator Do?

"For one thing, the translator does not do anything to the original text, as we sometimes hear in casual speech: the translator 'changed the word' or 'altered the word order.' The original

express, for language and meaning cannot really be separated. Although language refers to something, expresses something, it is not just symbols or clothing. Language is much more. One could say that we do not express ourselves using language, but rather that we live in the language. My home is the Finnish language."

The Essence of Translation

"When teaching literary translation, I have often told my students that understanding is at the core of it all, that you cannot translate what you do not understand. A poorly understood translation is a little like a symphony played on a recorder. But how can a translator understand something that has no single interpretation or static meaning? And even worse, if a work of art is an inexhaustible resource, how can it be frozen into a single translation? Nor is that all. There are lots of things the translator does understand, but that have no counterpart or perhaps no relevance in the receiving society. I do not mean words but rather realities, culture-bound phenomena, from actual objects to social hierarchies. If one sets out from the premise that the translation must be the equivalent of the original text in another language, translating is impossible. A translation cannot empty the original into a new language. The true goal of a translation is not to resemble the original text, but to fill its place, or, perhaps better, to create a similar place within the target culture."

Is the Translator an Artist?

"If literature is an art form, then the translator must also be an artist. The task of a translator into Finnish is to produce Finnish-language literature that can take its place unashamed beside original Finnish literature. A plastic spruce has no place in a ➤

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is her translation of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

In addition, Juva has been the long-time translator of the BBC comedy series *Men from the Ministry* for Finnish Radio, a series that has become a cult classic in its Finnish incarnation. Juva's translation of Aphra Behn's 1677 play *The Rover* was performed at the Finnish National Theatre in 1995. (Behn is considered the first professional woman writer in English literature.) Last fall, Juva's translation of the Tom Stoppard play *Rock 'n' Roll* ran at the Helsinki City Theater.

Today, Juva divides her time between homes in Finland and the U.K. She is a passionate bicyclist, touring different countries by bike,

text lives and thrives quite independent of the translator's activity. The translator starts out with a blank sheet of paper (a blank screen). The translator writes target-language text which has some relationship to the original text."

The Act of Translation

"Translating can be described more or less like this: I dress myself in the original text and start to imitate the author's gestures and movements in Finnish. If you want a translation to work as well in the target language as in the original, if you expect the final product to be real, living language, you must look through the language, behind it, and inside it. This is hard to

pinewood. I would also like to stress that the Finnish product is a different entity; it will have its own life in Finland, and many things that are relevant for the English reader will mean nothing to a Finn, and vice versa.”

Balancing Act

Juva stresses that translation is hard work. The translator must approach his or her task with humility for the responsibility it carries, but at the same time with self-confidence,

unnecessary effort. This means that I use idiomatic, clear Finnish, unless I have reason to be unidiomatic and unclear on purpose.”¹

This also means that Finnish readers can read and enjoy Juva’s translation of Sterne’s 18th-century classic *Tristram Shandy* more easily than modern English readers can read the original. Juva describes the process of translating *Tristram Shandy* into Finnish, the challenges it posed, and

sive and puns are language-bound, and working with Shakespeare and Wilde, to name but two in addition to Sterne, Juva has certainly faced her share of both.

“My aim was to produce a literary rather than literal translation that modern Finnish readers could enjoy, but which would at the same time convey as much as possible of [the author’s] world and style.... I found *Tristram Shandy* one of the funniest, smuttiest, and most hilarious books I have ever read. Surely it was my duty to convey this in Finnish, so when presented with a choice between, say, accuracy and a joke, I went for the joke every time.”²

A medal created in honor of Juva’s father bears the motto *magis amica veritas*. This applies well to translation, too: accuracy is important, but truth is a greater friend still. By “ditching accuracy when necessary,” as she puts it, and seizing opportunities offered by the target language, Juva can attain a truer form of fidelity. By not focusing on the trees, she captures the forest.

Lasting Impact

The awarding of an artist professorship to a translator generated an enormous amount of publicity and excitement in Finland. Newspapers ran feature articles on the story, and Juva was interviewed on national radio. The award is the result of long campaigning by literary translators to have their work recognized as an art form. Juva emphasizes the teamwork and solidarity within the translator community. She says “I feel like a Tour de France racer whose whole bike team has helped push her across the finish line in first place.” She is also using her new station to draw attention to problems

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believing himself or herself the equal of the author whose work is to be recreated in the new language and new context. Translators must balance their responsibility to both the author and the audience. In addition, Juva points out that who commissions a translation, and when, also affect the process more than is often realized. When translating, she says:

“My attitudes follow to a great extent the conventions of contemporary Finnish publishing houses and theaters, and these in turn are influenced by the expectations of the Finnish reading public and theatergoers.... My loyalty to the writer means that I cannot write something that he has not written unless I do it to be more faithful to his aims.... My loyalty to the reader demands that I produce something that he or she can read and understand without

the decisions she made, in a paper that is available in English on her website at www.turanko.net/kersti/a_bumpy_ride.htm.

In general, Juva says, “My first principle has been to try and create an effect similar to the one the author intended for his or her original audience.” She wants her audience to connect with what she presents. She opposes footnotes in non-academic literature. Consistent with the goal of readability, Juva recently argued for replacing the technically correct transliteration *Hryhori* with the more accessible form *Grigori* in a novel being translated from Ukrainian. “When reading literature, I don’t swallow large doses of enlightenment,” she quipped.

Creating an effect in the translation that is similar to the one originally intended also means producing texts as funny as the original. Humor is elu-

Finnish translators continue to face, such as stagnant pay, disproportionate and unrealistic pension contributions, and low visibility. Regarding the latter, Juva declares book translators deserve “their name on the cover and their mug on the dust jacket.”

It is hard to believe that more than 10 years have passed since I met Kersti Juva through an Internet discussion group devoted to translation. I had no idea who she was, other than an interesting and helpful list contributor who became a friend.

Most of you reading this article are translators in the U.S. Think about it: in the general public, how many people even know the name of a translator? On a visit to Finland, it quickly became apparent to me that people there know and admire Kersti Juva. From an 80-year-old friend on a farm to a computer specialist who claims he does not read much, people brightened at her name and told me that she is an excellent translator. Sure, Finland is a land of readers, where books are valued highly and people once had to pass a reading test in order to marry. Nevertheless it was startling to see the celebrity and affection a translator has earned. Juva says it is because she has been assigned great things to translate. Talented, unpretentious, prolific, endlessly energetic, and boundlessly generous, Juva continues to make an impact on Finns, Finnish literature, translation theory, and all translators.

Notes

1. www.turanko.net/kersti/classics.html
2. www.eng.helsinki.fi/projects-and-events/hes/Translation/tristram_shandy.htm

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Karhu, Tuomo. “Taiteenlajina suomentaminen” [“Art Form, Translating into Finnish”]. *Turun Sanomat* (November 2, 2008).

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Additional Sites

Kersti Juva's website
<http://turanko.net>

Arts Council of Finland
Information about the Artist Professorship is available online in English
www.taiteenkeskustoimikunta.fi/default.asp?WCI=wciFrames&strlanguage_id=en

Press release on the appointment of three Artist Professors
www.taiteenkeskustoimikunta.fi/default.asp?WCI=wciFrame_workspace&strlanguage_id=en&strsub_page=news&strAction=show_news&intSub_id=2&intId=458