

“ENDANGERMENT” IN THE LITERARY FIELD

Just as linguistic diversity is part of human heritage, so is narrative diversity. Linguistic diversity is part of our human heritage, and literary diversity needs our special attention, too. As endangerment is an important topic in general, documentary as well as computational linguistics of the last decades—so it is the concept of authors at risk in the field of literary studies. In the former field much theoretical and methodological investigation as well as documenting fieldwork has been done, and there is a growing digital archive and a serious number of academic works on endangered languages.

In the case of literature, we all know about the persistent activity of PEN International, the world's oldest human rights organization and the oldest international literary organization. Since its foundation in 1921 it acts as a powerful voice on behalf of writers harassed, imprisoned and sometimes killed for their works and views. In the meantime, over 50 of a total of 140 member Centers of International PEN have founded their own national Writers in Prison Committees. Book burnings are also known from human history. Usually carried out in a public context, the burning of books has represented an element of censorship and usually proceeds from a cultural, religious, or political opposition to the materials in question. In these three cases we can say that if the language is endangered, so is its literary production, if the author is endangered, so is his or her literary production, and if books are burned, literary texts can be endangered as well. Moreover, the concept of “endangerment” or “vulnerability” or of “being at risk” in the literary field can be evaluated not only in these cases but in the whole literary field.

The main thesis of this paper underlines the necessity to consider ethnolinguistic vitality as a supporting and relational factor to literary diversity; subsequently it is important to speak about endangerment of the literary field in its complexity as well. For this, we need to consider *what and how does hinder the unfolding conditions of respective literatures* written in different languages of the world. Before considering these different aspects one by one, it is important to outline a suitable concept of delineating ‘literature’ and its correlation to the demographic scale and political status of its users.

Just as the umbrella term ‘endangered languages’ includes a wide variety of languages from being vulnerable through definitely, seriously or critically endangered languages until extinct, the umbrella term of ‘endangered literature’ could refer to all of those literary fields where total or partial vulnerability can be attested. In this sense the authors of *The Red Book of the Peoples of the Russian Empire* have aptly summed up not only the habitat, history, linguistic and demographic situation of about hundred ethnies which languages are endangered, but gave also a succinct overview of their literary histories (Kolga et al. 2001). The tendencies in these literary histories are often very similar to the developments of Nenets literature described in the following way:

For centuries the Nenets, as most northern peoples, have used pictographic writing. Special family signs called *tamga* were used to mark property. Attempts to establish a written language were made by the Orthodox missionaries. In the 1830s archimandrite Venyamin Smirnov published some religious texts. Spelling books were also introduced (e.g. by J. Sibirtsev, 1895), however, they had little lasting success. In 1932 the Nenets literary language was established on the basis of the Bolshaya Zemlya vernacular (one of the Central vernaculars), using the Latin alphabet. A spelling book *adei vada* ('New World'), a reader, an arithmetic book and school glossaries were published, and a number of political writings and sketches of everyday life translated from Russian. In 1937 a transition to the Russian alphabet was made and since then there has also been partial compliance with Russian orthography.

Until recently the publishing output has consisted mainly of new schoolbooks (textbooks for primary schools, etc.) as well as some fiction and stories of everyday life. The best known writers are Tyko Vylka (1886–1960), Ivan Istomin (b. 1917) Leonid Lepstui (b. 1932), and Vassili Ledkov (b. 1933). The only newspaper in Nenets, *Nyaryana Ngyrm* ('The Red North'), is published in Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. Unfortunately, the quantity of literature published in Nenets is minimal and thus alongside the vast body of Russian work published, its influence is zero. (<http://www.eki.ee/books/redbook/nenets.shtml> (06.06.2017))

As in the case of all the indigenous population of Russia, also in the case of Nenets the overt power politics from the tsarist Russia, Soviet Regime until the present days of Russia uses more covert means to strengthen their regimes, with its principal aim of assimilating the local populace. However Nenets literature has proved in various forms its global relevance, if we think about their rich folklore or the postcolonial ecopoetry of Yuri Vella (cf. Lukin 2008; Toulouze 2011; Niglas 2005).

Bearing such stories in our mind, the aim of this chapter is first of all not to grade or classify literary fields in this respect but to point to the need of greater systematic insight into general or partial endangerment of the literary field. In doing so, we pay attention not only to its code, its agency and its texts but also to the vulnerability of creative processes in the literary field. With it, these four factors should be all set into relation to the production, distribution, reception and processing of the literary works. Since the factors manifest differently in the just listed subfields of the literary field, endangered literary phenomena should be considered along multiple conjunctions. Otherwise formulated, it is important to look to the interplay of code, agency, process and text in all the literary subfields.

VAST, MINOR AND ENDANGERED LITERATURES

The broad term of literature assumes all the imaginative or creative linguistic utterances, especially those of recognized artistic value. Central to literary pieces—be it oral, written or digital—, is the dominating manifestation of the poetic or aesthetic function among all other communication functions. This also induces that we can look at any verbal expression as a kind of “literary output”, as well as literature is able to include any verbal genres to its use. It is without question, that the moment the aesthetic production of a language drops the language shows a serious endangerment. And the more we boost literary productivity, the better the linguistic skills of the speakers.

Considering the linguistic diversity of literature, it is worth stating that eleven literary worlds (each having more or less 100 million mother tongue speakers) produce works for 51 percent of the world’s population (in Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Japanese, French and German, see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). These all have vast stores of literature, oral written and digital. A further 200 or so languages are used for literary production of another 44 percent of the world’s population (like Bulgarian, Finnish, Rumanian, or Mongolian). Consequently over 6000 languages are spoken

by groups of less than a million people each, with some languages of less than 1000 or even 10 speakers. Literary production and survival in these languages are highly vulnerable. Being conscious that 95 percent of the world's languages are spoken by only 5 percent of its population, we can see that linguistic diversity of the literary field is highly influenced by the extinction of these languages. Moreover, literary production in these languages is made very difficult, and inside literary scholarship literatures of endangered languages have a very weak position.

Along the three major groups outlined above based on the numbers of their speakers, it is productive to consider the applicability of this criteria to the literary fields of these languages. Along this argumentation line we can introduce the terms of vast, minor and endangered literatures.

For literatures written in the languages of the first group the term of 'vast literatures' can be introduced. They all possess strong autonomous literary fields, that means they are well established, majoritarian literary fields of modern nation states. These autonomous literary fields with international literary infrastructure are constituted by an elaborated social set of agents (e.g. a high number of authors, literary agents, publishers, critics, readers) under relatively favourable economic, political and cultural conditions. These conditions are supported by the rules established nationally but also globally.

Literary production of the second group, naming it with the term of 'minor literature', possesses also autonomous literary fields, however they are economically not as profitable as in the case of the first group. They are much less translated into other languages since they absorb works of the first group, and have much less potential buyers.

Literatures of the third group, labelled as 'endangered literature', can in no way speak of having autonomous literary fields, and not even about classifying itself as 'literatures' in a narrow sense (that would require a higher amount of published materials—at least as most of the literary scholars would presuppose). However endangered literature is definable not only through what is materialized (e.g. printed, digitalized) or potentially there (oral knowledge) but also through what is not there, through what cannot be there: the so called *missing output*. In this respect, endangered literatures are the subaltern worlds of *Weltliteratur*. Therefore, if a work appears in one of these languages, let's say in the Vepsian language, it does not need a complex literary infrastructure in order to be classifiable as part of a so called 'Vepsian literature'. All of ever spoken languages have possessed aesthetic linguistic forms that we nowadays would label with the term literature, no matter how well humanity could and can document it, no matter if it is oral, written or digital. Literature in this sense is universal, and

an organic part of a language culture. Therefore our third category includes literary worlds with oral traditions that we could document in depth (like the Karelian), or we could not document (like the Merya and Muroma), or we could or can partially document (like Khanti and Mansi), with strong written traditions (like Komi and North-Sámi) or weak written traditions (like Vepsian) and with weak or completely absent digital forms (like Pontic Greek or Urum). In works of several authors who are multilingual, but do not or cannot write in the endangered languages they otherwise ethnically identify with, we can trace aesthetic functions of the first language and often emotional topics related to language change. E.g. the Norwegian Aagot Vinterbo-Hohr's literary début in 1987 (*Palimpsest*) contains reflections on her Sámi background, her language change into Norwegian, while Sámi original poetical insertions segment the text. Similar examples can be found in the works of the Hanti Jeremy Aipin or the Manysi Juvan Shestalov.

ENDANGERMENT

REGARDING THE CODE, AGENCY AND PROCESSES OF A LITERARY TEXT

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, beside ethnolinguistic vitality it is necessary to consider what and how does influence the unfolding conditions of literatures written in all languages of the world. Therefore in the sections below let us have a look at various factors of the literary work and of the literary field and shortly consider their components.

In case of the code, it is worth considering their possible aesthetic manifestations as oral, printed or digital, as well as their transferability among its reading generations. But here is also worth thinking of such smaller issues as censoring out dialects, sociolects or code switching and slang expressions.

Regarding agency we think not only about e.g. writers, editors, critics, readers, translators, cultural activists, teachers and their unions but of bureaucrats, politicians and further institutions, who play a role in manifesting freedom of literary expression, or can influence literary vitality on the whole. For e.g. in the dictatorship of Ceausescu not only the life of minority but also majority writers would have been threatened if they were criticizing the system. Not to speak of the Sofin case in Volga region of Russia beginning of the 1930s. In Stalin's terror regime hundreds of Finno-Ugric authors and cultural figures (Mari, Mordvin, Udmurt, Komi and Karelian) were persecuted in a short time, putting a drastic end to the previous decades of constant literary developing.

Regarding creative processes it is worth thinking of all the works a person, a collective unit or an institution does in order to support the unfolding of a literary field, be it e.g. as writing, translating or performing a poem, taking decision on literary curricula of universities or organizing literary contests for kids in cultural revitalization processes. When recently for example, state subsidize have been suddenly and severely cut back from the Finland-Swedish literary and cultural organizations, many of the creative processes in this language have been placed at risk of not being able to be carried out further. When authors, journalists, film editors get less or no support for creating their artistic works, or they cannot be broadcasted—literary processes run into danger. Several authors report that their creative process is sometimes critically influenced by editors or other regulations. The Transylvanian-Hungarian writer András Visky talks in several of his interviews about how the title of his works were supposed to be changed or how the time limit forced for his plays endangered the authorial message.

Texts include manuscripts, oral, printed or digitalized versions of literary works, their translations, critical evaluation or their processing e.g. in educational works. Not only texts of endangered languages are worth to be considered, but any other textual product of the literary field that can be censored or destroyed because of cultural, religious, economic or political reasons. As an example let us recall the 1930s Nazi book burnings when the German Student Union ceremonially burnt hundred thousands of books. Those books were considered to be written by Jewish pacifist, classical liberal, anarchist, socialist, and communist authors, who were viewed as being subversive and opposing to the dominant political ideology.

ENDANGEREMENT OF THE LITERARY FIELD

Literary production means not only writing, translating but also printing, digitalizing, documenting a literary work. In cases of all those languages that cannot phase the digital turn, their literary production is endangered to reach into the new medium. Not to speak about the oral narratives or printable manuscripts of recently migrated authors from Africa, whose literary production faces new risks in their new social context.

Distribution of literary works does not only depend on the local but also of the global literary infrastructure. While on the one side with the more and more globalization of the book markets very distant literary worlds can get into contact, on the other side less and less translations have been done from minor or endangered languages into the bigger languages.

Thus the present global but many national distribution strategies are mainly one way streets. However, the developments of contemporary social media have offered several new forms for enabling publicity for previously silenced authors and their audiences—and we have to remain hopeful that aesthetic products will always find their suitable distribution.

Obstacles not only in the production or distribution but also in the reception of the literary production can be observed, such as in the case of the lontar reading tradition practiced by the Sasaks for many centuries on Lombok in eastern Indonesia. Due to recent preference of Arabic and Indonesian in ritual and religious contexts, lontar readings are suddenly no longer performed. According to Peter Austin, a leading scholar in documentary linguistics, this endangered literary practice of performing readings of manuscripts originally written on the dried leaves of the lontar palm has fallen into disuse on Lombok, mainly because of lack of interest from younger generations and association of it with non-Islamic practices. Especially because of their Hindu and animistic beliefs are these manuscripts nowadays dispreferred by the majority of Muslim leaders and therefore the local Nusa Tenggara Barat government (Austin 2009).

Processing of the literary works include among others the integration of literary works in other fields of the society (e.g. in scholar curricula, social life), of their interlingual or intermedial translations, or their usage in the revitalization movements. Several succeeded projects can be reported from 19th century when languages managed to booster their literary output, and successfully integrate into their political and cultural emancipation. Hungarian, Czech and many other, today so-called national literatures are a good example for this.

LITERARY DIVERSITY AS HUMANISTIC VALUE

Languages in assimilation processes, cultures without their language education, writers unable to publish their books, poems, and stories, literary organizations forbidden from meeting, social media communities chilled by government infiltration, and rising incidents of blackmail and extortion of literary agents—all of these are issues belonging to be considered under the wide umbrella term of endangered literature. Though recent decades document a growing scholarly interest in literatures of endangered languages (see indigenous and postcolonial studies) and a growing number of literary publications in this regard, as well as the democratization of world literature and cultural policies, the work is—as David Golumbia

puts it—“slow, fraught, poorly-understood, difficult, and by no means guarantees a salutary outcome” (2013, 241).

Being inspired by Lucius Annaeus Seneca who wrote that “increases are of sluggish growth, but the way to ruin is rapid” (Bardi 2011), the Italian scholar Udo Bardi calls our attention to processes when after a systematic growth the fall is rapid. This is what we can see by the contemporary drastic falling back of linguistic diversity in our world, after a relatively long period of stable diversity, and a much slower extinction rate in the last centuries. Similar effect can be detected in the North-Sámi literature. Regarding their female writers as well as their output, Vuokko Hirvonen traces back the establishing of Sámi women authors at the beginning of the 20th century with two female writers. The next two generations are formed by tens of writers, where the women born between 1940-60 managed to have a constantly growing literary output until the recent turn of the century. As for the fourth generation Vuokko Hirvonen traces only a handful of authors (2008, 218). In the present moment the youngest generation is again at numbers just as hundred years ago. This sudden drop can be located with the generation born after 1980’s—in the best time ever of published North-Sámi literature.

Literary diversity has humanistic value. It is essential to intellectual, linguistic, literary and aesthetic creativity. In this sense this chapter drew attention to various phenomena of the literary field where endangerment plays a crucial role. It investigated not only code and agency related endangerment on the literary field, but of process and text related phenomena across the literary field. Hereby we took into consideration the related processes of producing, distributing and reception of literature. Just as linguistic documentation does, literary studies need to further raise our attention to eventual unfavorable developments in the unfolding of literary processes.