

NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: ICELAND

THOT (Þot)

A small association with a big heart

Guðrún Catherine Emilsdóttir

Next year, Bandalag þýðenda og túlka (The Icelandic Association of Translators and Interpreters – THOT) will celebrate its 20th anniversary. While for many comparable associations in Europe this may not seem particularly noteworthy, for a country with Iceland’s small population of around 390,000, it is quite an accomplishment, especially for an association run by unpaid volunteers. THOT was founded by Gauti Kristmannsson and several other sector professionals. Gauti, who served as its first chair until 2009, is currently a Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Iceland and remains active within the association.

Times change, focal issues remain

Reflecting on the association’s origins and comparing them to its current status is enlightening. THOT was established in response to a growing and dispersed number of translators and interpreters, who were either embedded in various companies or working as independent contractors with minimal networking opportunities. The vision was to create an umbrella organisation encompassing several smaller associations of translators (both literary and technical)

and interpreters. This provided a platform for members to communicate, exchange ideas, and exercise collective influence on editors, companies and the government regarding issues pertinent to their field, such as rights (encompassing both authors’ rights and general rights), quality, education, and visibility of translators. Notably, during the year 2004, there was a wage dispute between audiovisual translators and the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, and larger companies were attempting to dominate the market with low-paid translations of DVD materials.

Two decades later, the association grapples with strikingly similar issues: visibility of translators and interpreters, wage disputes, and, intriguingly, large companies trying to control the market with low-paid translations of streaming materials, such as films, TV programmes and books. It’s noteworthy how the ‘invisible translator’ syndrome is so deeply ingrained in society, rendering translators undervalued as vital contributors to culture.

Today, THOT has established itself as a socially responsible entity, fostering



productive collaborations with various organisations, such as the Writers' Union of Iceland (RSÍ), the Icelandic Book Publishers' Association, The University of Iceland, and the government. Our yearly activities predominantly involve organising events with translators, interpreters, and the academic community, often open to the general public. Highlights include the annual presentation of the Translation Awards for the best-translated literary fiction and the Icepick Award for the best-

translated crime story. Every other year, the Honorary Award, Orðstír, is presented for translations of Icelandic literature into a foreign language.

AI arrives in Iceland

Presently, THOT's most pressing issue, common to many European countries, is the proliferation and application of AI in the realms of creation and culture. Major companies like Storytel are beginning to approach Icelandic translators, requesting them to post-edit AI-generated translations for half the standard translation rates. Many translators have expressed their discontent regarding this development to us, and fortunately, we have not heard of any who have accepted such offers. News about this reached the media, sparking public discussions and social media debates, and leading to interviews with the chairs of both THOT and The Writers' Union.

We have voiced our concerns about the potential negative impacts of utilizing AI in literary translations, especially for a micro-language like Icelandic. Currently, THOT is drafting a statement opposing the use of AI in literary and audiovisual translations. In addition, following a well-attended conference about AI and copyright held by The Writers' Union in collaboration with artists' associations, THOT will organize a panel to further explore this issue in the near future.



Honorary Award Oristir 2023
Jacek Godek, Gaudi Krismannsson,
Luciano Dutra
Photo: Guðrún C. Emilsdóttir



Guðrún Catherine Emilsdóttir is the chair of THOT since 2019. She has been translating from French and English into Icelandic for about 30 years, mostly in the field of technical translations, but she has also translated children's books, comic books, philosophical articles and fiction books. She also works as community interpreter in the language pair French–Icelandic.

Guðrún Catherine Emilsdóttir
Photo: Þiðrik Emilsson

Association info

Name: Bandalag þýðenda og túlka (Þot) (The Icelandic Association for Translators and Interpreters (THOT))

Founded: 30th September 2004
Number of members: 112, of which about 30% are working as literary translators

Protector of the association: Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, former president of Iceland

Iceland's capital Reykjavík is the home of two CEATL member organisations: Bandalag þýðenda og túlka (The Icelandic Association of Translators and Interpreters – THOT) and Rithöfundasamband Íslands (The Writers Union of Iceland – RSÍ). In Spring 2024, THOT will host the CEATL AGM there, with some help from RSÍ as well.

This gives us the opportunity to get a closer look at how things are done in Iceland. What do the Icelandic associations focus on? What are some of their highlights and current issues? The associations' CEATL delegates, Guðrún Catherine Emilsdóttir (THOT) and Þórunn Hafstað (RSÍ) tell us all.