

Peer Review

Review of: "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures"

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This review comes from a linguist and literature lover rather than a literary scholar and should be taken as such. My judgments derive from my passion for reading, not an in-depth study (or indeed understanding) of the field.

The goal that the authors set for themselves, i.e., to arrive at a clearer and more convincing definition of small literatures and a more reliable methodological framework for studying them, is laudable. It is not easy for many reasons, among them because the very term “small literature” suffers from inherent negativity: small is opposed to big, and big means major, important, influential. It is therefore necessary that the authors survey and comment on many other terminological options, which they do very competently, as far as I can tell.

But do the authors deliver what they promise? Here’s where my competence perhaps fails me a little. They announce that they will focus on both quantitative and qualitative criteria for their definition. And yet, they say: “In our view, a small literature is defined as a literary system or subsystem that is quantitatively smaller (in terms of its repertoire, its media, its actors, and the institutions of literary production, mediation, reception, and criticism) than the average or large literary systems among or within which it exists.” This looks like quantity – or am I missing something? I have spent a longer while trying to extract from the rest of the argumentation the qualitative aspects; would those be the ones mentioned in the final paragraph on p. 9, for example? Or would it be the notion of “repertoire” (p. 11)? Not sure how to read those. I can surmise that a more knowledgeable reader will pick up the relevant content with little problem, as I do believe it is there, but the authors, just maybe, could make it a little easier by being more straightforward.

A good aspect of the paper is the attention it pays to translation (e.g., 10). I have found over and over again in my academic work that the role of translation is more often programmatically acknowledged than

actually followed and made solid use of in analyses (and while arriving at judgments); I do hope Jeanne and her colleagues will make this their research reality.

I'd also like to comment, second-hand, on one of the books reported on in this paper, Chitnis et al. *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*. I do believe the book is an important contribution to the field, but for the love of me, I cannot grasp why Polish (my mother tongue), a language spoken by nearly 40 m people, is included in the same category as Bosnian (just over 3m) or Maltese (0.6 m). Also, the presence of Dutch (25-30m) in this line-up is puzzling. Of course, it's difficult to judge without first-hand access to the source, and quite possibly there is justification for it – it's just that “smallness” here is a very unconvincing concept. If by smallness is meant not only the number of speakers but the relative importance of a given literary tradition or lack thereof (would that be what the editors refer to as “qualitative” criteria?), let me just point out that Polish writers have won the Nobel Prize 5 times (more than in all the other categories combined), not to mention several other international awards and the influence of writers who, according to many, actually deserved the Nobel but never got it (Stanisław Lem, Zbigniew Herbert, Ryszard Kapuściński). So, several questions here – but those go to Chitnis and colleagues rather than to Jeanne, Marko, and Benedikts.

The paper is very well-written, in good academic English – although I must say that not being a frequent reader of literary scholarship, I have struggled with (and had to reread a few times) the more challenging fragments, complex sentences, and multi-layered ideas.

Perhaps the authors might consider dividing the paper into sections for easier navigation? This is standard practice in linguistics, at least; not sure about literary studies.

On the whole, a fine paper on an important topic.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.