



**A Campfire Called Literature:
Diversity of Languages, Linguistic Minorities and Bilingual Events at Literature
Festivals and other Literary Programmes (for Children, Teenagers and Young
Adults)**

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Preliminary Notes

¡Buenas tardes! I am very grateful to be part of this panel today. Thank you very much. ¡Gracias!

What I'll present to you – as briefly as possible – is ... (a) how festivals or similar literary events can contribute to the promotion of smaller resp. minority languages and how they can positively *confront* children, teenagers and young adults with literature in different languages, even in smaller resp. minority languages; and (b) I would like to talk about the way how in such festivals we managed to overcome the *bridge of languages* (of common languages such as English, French and Spanish for example that are taught in primary and secondary schools in Germany, and those languages like Finnish, Greek, Norwegian, Japanese etc. that are not common to German children and adolescents and in this spirit could be regarded *as smaller or even minority languages* at an international literature festival).

There for, in the following I am particularly referring to those two festival projects that were mentioned earlier.

To bring reading, writing and illustrating alive through fabulous readings and storytelling sessions, workshops and exhibitions – this is the idea to which I am passionately committed in all the projects that I am involved in. My aspiration is to open up the world of the imagination to children and young people, to impart to them the joy of the text (and its language) and inspire them with enthusiasm for reading, writing and creativity – all this in support of their linguistic and cultural socialisation.

Festivals and other literary events want to introduce children and young people to the most diverse ways of thinking and living, to foster in them a critical approach to

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stories, ideas and cultures; and to encourage them to explore their own creative and aesthetic talents. The idea is that by taking part together in readings and by trying their hand themselves in workshops, children and young people can broaden their linguistic and social skills, hone their imaginative abilities and their concentration skills, develop a sense of themselves and of others, and come to understand texts as mines of information, ideas, dreams and as sources of modes of thinking and behaving that are relevant to their own lives. Linking specific foreign authors with pleasant experiences, coming into contact with the literature and language, folklore and mythology of other countries – this is the best antidote to prejudice, discrimination and negative stereotyping of other nations and cultures and this is what I try to achieve in my work.

Please allow me now – briefly – to characterize two projects that deal with international children's and youth literature and offer bi-lingual events before I'll try to highlight how these projects managed to overcome the bridge of languages and handled smaller resp. minority languages.

Festivals and other Literary Events

The Berlin International Literature Festival has in the years of its existence (since 2001) become one of the largest and most reputable literature festivals in the world. Over 30,000 visitors meet authors and illustrators every year at more than 250 readings, discussions, workshops, film events and performances all over Berlin. For twelve days every September, literature is debated with a kind of joyous hysteria and doors are opened onto strange new worlds, as more than 120 authors from all over the globe are invited to read from their work and to meet the people of Berlin – at the festival's main venue, but also in embassies, foundations, schools, libraries, museums, theatres all over the city.

Among further programme sections the festival has an extensive programme of events featuring international writers and illustrators for children and young people. This programme called "International Children's and Youth Literature" belongs to the three main pillars of the festival, and has constantly grown in repute and importance.

The festival itself and this programme section in particular resonate far beyond Europe's borders. The high literary quality of the guests is especially valued, as are the programme's social consciousness and the equal treatment of this literary area within an



international festival. In addition, the programmatic scope and diversity, as well as the various venues and the international exchange aspect are greatly appreciated by the festival guests, the audience and media. The fact that an international festival accords children's literature such an important role alongside adult literature and provides it with such space is unique – worldwide.

The brand new White Ravens Festival for International Children's and Youth Literature, initiated by and taking place at the International Youth Library in Munich, offered in its first edition in July 2010 an excellent forum for extraordinary and innovative children's and youth literature as well where renowned artists rubbed shoulders with exciting literary newcomers – in the city of Munich but also all around entire Bavaria.

As the world's largest library for international children's and young adult literature with a unique collection of almost 600,000 books in 130 languages, the International Youth Library is an internationally recognised centre providing wonderful research opportunities and offering a varied programme of exhibitions, readings, lectures, workshops, and international author and illustrator forums, to name but a few. The term "White Ravens" has been established as a synonym for extraordinary children's literature for years. "White Ravens" are books of high quality with regards to language as well as content and illustration.

It is the goal of such festivals and of my work in general to present a Representative cross-section of top-class children's and youth literature from various continents and language areas, from major as well as smaller languages – from picture books to children's novels, from comics and graphic novels to literature for young adults. It is about trying to achieve a balance of male and female, of well-known and emerging and of older and younger authors and illustrators working in different genres and on different themes (the Berlin festival for example each year invites about 15-20 authors and illustrators, among them about 3 guests from English speaking countries, 3 from French speaking countries, 3 from German speaking countries, and then about 1-2 guests each from Scandinavia, Benelux, Near East, Africa or Asia, South European and East European countries and Spanish/Portuguese speaking countries). Their journey together with the participating children and young people from continent to continent,



with stopovers in the most diverse linguistic and cultural regions, is at the heart of the programme and event planning.

Aesthetic-literary education, integration & tolerance, these guiding principles are implemented by means of diverse conceptual and organisational details which stage children's and youth literature beyond the scope of clichés such as *childlike-childish* or as a one-dimensional reaction to the *post-Pisa shock*, concentrating instead on the literary and aesthetic qualities.

The schedule of events, especially at the Berlin festival, is open to schools, day care centres, youth clubs and families with children of all ages. Special efforts are made to include children and youths from so-called Socially or Educationally Disadvantaged Families, from Multicultural Urban Districts as well as children and teenagers Living in Smaller Language Communities or even in Linguistic Minorities.

Such festivals offer a wide Range of Events – both within and outside of the school context.

A great deal of readings, workshops and projects take place at the main festival venue as well as in cooperating cultural institutions, schools and libraries and are geared towards students who participate as a school class together with their teachers. These school programmes cater for all age levels and school types, from primary school to the final year in secondary or high school (ages 6-20).

In addition, these festivals offer a range of events and leisure activities for children, teenagers and families outside the schools, far removed from the pressure to perform and the expectations of the curriculum.

These festivals are also a forum for adult readers, parents, teachers and literature mediators from which they can derive expert glimpses into the literature scene as a starting point for discussions of current trends and developments in international children's and youth literature.

The event's focus – mainly in Berlin – is not on experiencing literature passively; emphasis is placed on young visitors' own creative potential and the interaction between the young audience and the authors who can here operate cheek by jowl with their audience. Creative methods of transmission and types of events are oriented towards the reading needs of children and teenagers. Thus, creative workshops



in museums, for example, and projects lasting several days are of particular importance next to *conventional* readings.

Taking all this into consideration while organizing a festival resp. an event programme, to me it is absolutely important that – as basic principal – the Same Selection Criteria apply to such projects as they do for adult programmes: literary quality, the aspect of discovery, diversity and internationality. And this leads me to 2 important aspects for today's panel:

- Authors and illustrators from all over the world and in many languages are invited; this means: Writers otherwise unknown in Germany present their work for young readers.

- *Even more important:* The encounters with authors are mostly bilingual (or even exclusively held in the original language).

Bilingual & Original Language Events

At literature programmes of this character it is no problem at all if invited writers or illustrators do not speak German. Participating guests – in *classic* readings – present their work in the original language (their mother tongue). In order for the German speaking audience to understand and appreciate the texts the German translation is read by an actor or actress. Expert presenters and interpreters facilitate the conversations between audience and authors.

Apart from bilingual events there are also readings and workshops that are only held in the original language of the guests, without any translation. This mainly happens with common languages such as English and French as they are languages taught in German schools and since language teachers are interested in challenging the language skills of their pupils by offering them meetings with artists of these languages. But also other languages – that could here be named *minority languages* since they are not taught in regular German schools and first and foremost belong to small language communities within a place, a city or a region) – such as Albanian, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Chinese, Danish etc. are referred to in monolingual, original language events.

Promotion of As-Yet Untranslated Literature



Apart from presenting international writers and illustrators in bilingual events such projects contribute to promote literature written in smaller resp. minority languages in particular by including in their programmes writers whose books have not yet been published by German language publishers and which are therefore exclusively translated for the event's audiences. The Berlin as well as the Munich festival that I mentioned specifically stick to this.

In Berlin every year, the work of up to one-third of the authors and illustrators who are invited has to be translated exclusively for the festival. For example, the offbeat work of the Russian writer Grigory Oster – considered a classic of children's literature in Russia – was a long overdue discovery for German readers. His works were presented for the first time in German during the Berlin festival of 2005. Again in Munich, Luis María Pescetti from Argentina and Grzegorz Kasdepke from Poland met their German audiences for the first time, by the help of exclusive translations (further examples: Evgenios Trivizas (Greece), Vytautas V. Landsbergis (Lithuania), Xabier DoCampo (Galicia), Beatrice Masini (Italy), Daniel Hevier (Slovakia), Xao Wenxuan (China), Desa Muck (Slovenia) etc.).

This – in brief – is the character and philosophy of (festival) events I am dealing with in my work quite often.

To make (Minority) Languages Be Understood

International children's literature programmes such as those described, attempt to provide children and young people with access to books and reading, to widen their horizons, and to cultivate their emotional, social, linguistic and artistic development – via diverse languages that need to be translated or let's say: that need to be *made understood!*

The internationality of such literary events obviously poses a special challenge for the design of the programme, but in fact, the *language barrier* can at the same time be an enrichment both for the artists and the young audience. It *is* (!) possible to bring a foreign culture and language to life with charm and charisma, and to create curiosity about what might seem strange and distant.

However, you have to pay attention: Adults participating in a festival or literary event are, to a large extent, self-selected individuals, that already have a broad



cosmopolitan outlook, an interest in other cultures and not rarely do speak foreign languages. Children, however, need to be respectfully guided through the world of cultures and languages. They are still in the process of forming their attitudes and belief systems and therefore are in much greater need of such events that open their minds to cultural and linguistic diversity, but might not have the needed abilities yet.

So, how does it work? How do you face the diversity of languages within a festival in general? And how can you in particular support linguistic minorities within literature marathons or just within a single event? No doubt, the mediation of a foreign culture and its language places a demand, first and foremost, on the organizers to take into consideration many, many details, seriously. The dramaturgical and pedagogical expertise of the organizers is more than necessary. Please allow me to point out just a few exemplary aspects that might be worthwhile to consider:

To start with aspect n° 1: Nothing is more engaging for children and young people than the experience of an authentic author from a foreign country, who knows how to interact playfully with them, and who encounters his or her young audience with respect, sincerity and humour. But of course, you cannot expect every writer or illustrator to be an *entertainer* him- or herself. What counts is the literary quality and not the performance competence. That means: Try to get information about the communicative and social competence of authors and illustrators themselves (from agents, publishers, etc.) so that you can... Create a balanced programme of writers who can themselves act like performers and try to present those writers who are not at all entertainers by giving them charming supporting presenters / actors / interpreters!

This leads me directly to aspect n° 2: Book excellent presenters, actors and interpreters. Look for presenters, actors and interpreters who are not only focussing on children's events, but also deal with adult programmes. Meet all of them in advance to check if they are able to get in touch to children and adolescents without treating them in a *childish way*, but respectfully; check if they know how to respond to children and adolescents. Share with them all your information about the character of the (children's) audience (age, interest, language level, the districts where they come from etc.) and provide information about the writer, his life and his work. Tell them that it is up to them to charmingly *infect* the young audience with enthusiasm for the writer/illustrator and his/her books. Especially the role of the interpreter is important: He should not act



like in a congress, but should turn towards his young audience and take care of the technical part of *bringing a language to life*. By all means, the young audience should feel respectfully treated like an adult audience (not without referring to relevant children's aspects of course) by all participating people on the *stage*. And all of them should *serve* to make the writer/illustrator, to *shine*...!

Aspect n° 3: Decide for the most suitable book(s) for the specific age group and for the best passage(s) to read from it! An event can succeed or fail – depending on the choice of the text passage(s). Go for 2-3 parts of a novel OR several stories OR a couple of poems – of course depending on the age group of the audience and the duration of the event. For a 90 minutes reading event (in Germany for example) you should have at least 30-45 minutes reading text – but here we can of course notice cultural differences. Never read from more than two different novels; it is better to stick to just one novel, but to read several parts from it. Never give the closing chapter resp. the ending of the novel away. Ask the author to introduce the book and tell about the progress of the plot.

Corresponding to this is the next aspect - Aspect no. 4: Assure that you have enough text translated (in case of as-yet untranslated literature)! It's always a pity to disappoint enthusiastic young readers who long to hear more of the chosen book, story, etc. Apart from that having enough text translated allows you to offer teachers parts that won't be read during the event to prepare with their pupils in advance.

The most important aspect, *the king's road* to create a successful bi-lingual event is – Aspect n° 5: Create the most convenient procedure of presenting, reading, talking and playing a part in the event! It is a question of valuation to give the writer the freedom even in bi-lingual events to present his work in his own language first. To me it is absolutely important that first you can hear the voice and the language of the writer himself, to hear his literature read by himself, before presenters, actors and interpreters join him.

The classic procedure that promises success could be the following: 3-4 minutes original reading of the beginning of the first chosen text passage, read by the author himself (if it is for example an English-German or a French-German event you can also extend the original reading to 10-15 minutes) – afterwards: a longer passage from a novel of about 20-40 minutes; maybe split into different parts with explanations by the author in between. The younger the audience is, the better it is to chose the same



passage to be read in the original language first and in translation afterwards; in case of a slightly older audience with certain language skills you can also start with a text passage in original language and then continue the reading in (here: German) translation from that point on, following the plot of the book.

Sometimes you are even lucky to have writers who are gifted with a wonderful talent of reading their own texts, sometimes as good as professional actors – for example Maria Parr from Norway impressed her young audience at the White Ravens Festival by her funny and expressive performance that made her Norwegian language sound familiar to anybody and made her audience understand the atmosphere of her novel without understanding any precise line of the Norwegian text.

Moreover, sometimes we are happy to have guests (for example from Scandinavian or Benelux countries) who do speak a little German. In these cases – at the Berlin festival for example – we tend to create a charming mixture of reading and talking in original language, supported by the interpreter, and asking the guest also to read a part of the German translation of his literature by himself; in case of shorter texts or poems you can even create a little dramaturgy alternating writer and actor, original language and translation. By all means, stay flexible and adapt the general procedure always with respect to every individual writer, text and audience!

Aspect n° 6: (Minority Language) Organize (original language) writing, translating, poetry, song writing or illustration workshops – conducted by the writer or illustrator himself, by literary translators, educators, pedagogues etc.! And don't forget to offer monolingual (open) events to families from smaller language communities! Creative workshops gift the young audience not only with the opportunity to engage directly with verbal and artistic creations and the process of writing and illustration, but also to experience the world itself, in all its linguistic and multicultural diversity, and to tap directly into it for themselves. Only held in the original language, these workshops are a wonderful opportunity especially for smaller resp. minority language communities to get benefit from the internationality of such literary events.

Also have in mind to offer monolingual events to parents and their children in the free-time.

To conclude this undoubtedly fragmentary list of some practical ideas, here are the three final aspects that to me are the most important *guidelines* in order to



successfully overcome the *bridge of languages*, you could say they are my *personal credo*!

Aspect n° 7: Try to find (thematically and linguistic) suitable cooperating partners! Together try to create encounters where the (minority) language is *placed in a certain cultural or creative frame* (and do not only stick to classic readings)!

Aspect n° 8: (Minority language) Go for a close cooperation with foreign language schools, with official school boards and the teachers themselves! Involve suitable partners for the diverse languages, in particular for the minority languages that are represented (e.g. embassies, cultural foundations)!

Aspect n° 9: Challenge the schools, teachers and pupils! Make them prepare the events! Offer prepared teaching concepts (also in the foreign language, including vocabulary etc.)!

Please allow to comment this briefly:

In order to bring to life a smaller or minority language do not stick to classic readings only, but try to create encounters with a special atmosphere that challenge the young audience – events such as a museum’s rallye, a walking poem, etc. Here are some examples from the Berlin Literature Festival:

- After a reading based on his bilingual books, the poet, children’s and youth author, musician and actor Juan Felipe Herrera from Mexico/United States brought a *walking poem* to live; he wandered through the “Museum for Ethnology” (Berlin State Museums) with his young audience, introduced the Mexican art and culture to his young audience, discussed with the pupils the topic “Growing up between two cultures” and animated them finally to join a “Poetic treasure hunt” throughout the museum to “discover” their own poems in English and Spanish – all this inspired by selected objects in the exhibit that were prepared in advance (writing poems in the exhibition).

- Another example is the Chinese-French illustrator Chen Jianghong whom we invited to be guest of the Museum for South-Asian Art (Berlin State Museums) where museum’s pedagogues offered the young participating audience – after a reading from Chen’s picture books – to examine objects from the museum’s archives such as ink, xuan-paper and silk, Chinese textiles and traditional scrolls (in order to bring the Chinese art of writing and painting alive).



- One of the most successful events in this respect was the *literary circus*, a project that took place over several days for class 5/6 pupils (age 10-12) in which children interact playfully with texts by chosen festival authors and transformed them into other forms of art; a project that culminated in a *Circean* presentation in a Berlin children's circus with the participation of the authors. Here pupils developed intoxicating transformations of the texts of *their* authors: They presented translations of the work of the Greek writer Evgenios Trivizas, illustrated objects from a picture book by the Austrian writer Heinz Janisch, dramatized interpretations of poems by the Slovakian Daniel Hevier and dubbed an animated film by the Russian Grigory Oster – for all these art projects a close examination of the text and its language was necessary.

For all this is it important to have established for years a close personal relationship to your cooperating partners as well as to schools and their teachers – a relationship that is based on professionalism, know-how, appreciation, trust and loyalty. What you need are cooperating partners, schools and teachers that are eager to join your journey throughout the diversity of cultures and languages.

Check out special boards of schools, visit committee sessions, go on panels, etc. In Berlin we often tend to invite schools to attend events at the main venue, but at the same time offer them to invite one of the festival guests to come to their school.

Also, in Berlin we do have the wonderful opportunity to have special bilingual schools (such as Greek-German, Spanish-German schools etc.); for my work the collaboration with these schools was and is essential.

By offering papers (i.e. concepts for teaching, biographies of the writers, extracts from the books in the original language and in translation, lists with useful websites etc.) you encourage the teachers also to become interested in writers/illustrators from smaller language communities and writers whose works are not yet translated (instead of just being interested in those writers and their book to whom they can get an easy access) – you need to create an easy access to all writers (also to those of minority languages).

Involve university seminars to work out concepts for teachers on each writer/book and offer these papers in advance of the event, including vocabulary list etc. Do not fear to *challenge* cooperating partners, schools, teachers and pupils – it is up to the



organizers of international literary events to set the standard, especially if you want to promote literature of linguistic minorities.

Conclusion

My personal experience with bi-lingual events and minority languages within literary programmes is absolutely positive, in all respects. Giving children and adolescents – in general, with a special multicultural background or from smaller linguistic communities – the chance to get in direct contact to writers and illustrators from all over the world (also from their home countries) is – no doubt – a wonderful opportunity to strengthen their (linguistic, cultural and social) self-esteem and their interest for literature and cultures.

You can (a) support a minority language community by offering an exclusive author's event that just focuses on the children's original culture and language (without any translation);

(b) moreover bi-lingual events that also appeal to a German speaking audience offer children and adolescents from linguistic minorities the opportunity for linguistic integration into the language of their country of residence while – at the same time – you can strengthen the self-confidence of any single child of a minority language within a multicultural class; and

(c) not to forget the benefits given to the (here) German audience to get to know the language and literature of a minority language community.

All this means to smoothly support and broaden the children's linguistic integration (into for example the German language and society and vice versa) without at the same time *being ripped out of their own cultural roots*. This is the incomparable and un-matched chance of international literature events that feature authors from all over the world and that aim at also addressing smaller language communities as their audiences!

If you take care of these few aspects that I briefly highlighted and – at the same time – trust in the capabilities of children and adolescents, it will work to positively *confront* them with the diversity of languages. Youngsters always *win* something from an encounter with a writer or illustrator from abroad, even if the language is unknown to them and even if listening to the translation demands concentration.



As a matter of course, in this age of multiple consumer entertainments, of marketing interests etc., it can be difficult to stick with such an enormous idealistic project, but when Louis Jensen of Denmark tells us – in his personal Danish-German language, charmingly interpreted by a Berlin interpreter – about his cigar-smoking wellington boot; when Jenny Robson of Botswana tells – in African English with some spreads of Kiswaheli – the story of her encounter with children in a little diamond-mining village on the edge of the Kalahari desert; when a magician performer like Algerian-French Azouz Begag gets 600 youngsters singing *La Vie en Rose* in four languages – then that is indeed an achievement, and it makes it worthwhile to light the *literary campfire* as often as possible.

Resuming his festival participation in Berlin the Austrian children's book writer and poet Heinz Janisch said:

It was as if I was sitting around a campfire called Literature with lots of children and people from all over the world who, like me, love poems and stories. There we all were together, and the campfire warmed us. We chatted, laughed, ate, drank, told stories. We gave each other presents. I came home with books from Greece, Egypt, France, and keen to write lots of new stories...

The thrilling discoveries that audience and authors make during literature marathons touch hearts and minds, where they do their secret work in silence, only to re-emerge later in the form of yet more words and pictures – in many different languages, even those that we call minority languages and that need our special concern!

