

# Edition

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Editors' Association of Canada, Toronto branch

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## Lost Without Translation

by Elizabeth Kelly

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Presenters Beatriz Hausner and James Roberts

If you came to the May 30 EAC Toronto branch meeting expecting to hear about French/English translation issues, you weren't disappointed. If that's all you expected, you were probably surprised to hear that our government's focus on French/English translation has meant insufficient resources for translating international works.

The first speaker, Beatriz Hausner, is a published poet and literary translator with a passionate interest in the literary traditions of Spanish America and International Surrealism. She is also a past president of the Literary Translators Association of Canada.

### Translation Inspires Canadian Culture

According to Hausner, the Canadian literary identity is composed of two solitudes: Canadian writers published in English, and those published in French.

Hausner said that Canadians want to read great books. But she also said that, without Canadian-published translations of international works, the pool of great books readily available to Canadians is too small. Not only do readers lose out, but so do Canadian writers and Canadian literary culture. Hausner made a strong argument for cross-pollination across languages and national borders. As an example, she pointed to the many Latin American poets influenced by Spanish-language translations of poetry published in France and England at the turn of the twentieth century. Without this cross-pollination, she fears that Canadian literature may become "too narrow and self-referential."

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### Not Much Work Around

The limited market for translation means there is not much work for Canadian translators (and the editors working with them). Hausner says only a handful of people make a full-time living as literary translators in Canada, despite the high number of qualified people. Hausner herself has yet to give up her day job as a librarian, even though she has translated more than 25 works.

### Get Political

What can editors do about this?

According to Hausner, we can get political. We can demand that Canadian arts councils create grants for translators and translations. We can look for foreign works we want to see published and then find local translators to work on them. “To do an English translation, all you have to do is secure the English language rights,” Hausner said. “Editorially, you must know which books to publish—which will be the great ones.” Hausner said that to work as an editor on a translation, the editor “must be a great connoisseur of the literature of the target language.” The editor must be familiar with the cadences of the language to maintain the tone and voice of the original work. And, as always, the editor must be creative. When one EAC member asked Hausner how to deal with the problem of translating a word or concept that does not exist in the English language, Hausner, in her surrealist fashion, replied: “You must find it. It is there. Use your imagination.”

### The Global Village

While a dearth of translating/editing work exists in literary Canada, the case is not the same in corporate Canada. The evening’s second speaker, James Roberts, is a senior information strategist for IBM and the current director for York University’s Technical Communication program. He has also worked as a writing and communications instructor with the Translation Department at York University’s Glendon College. Unlike literary Canada, corporate publishers such as



IBM are firmly ensconced in the global village and must deliver documentation in multiple languages. “Translation and translation issues are a major focus of corporate publishers such as IBM,” Roberts said.

According to Roberts, IBM is the world’s second-largest publisher (behind the U.S. government). Every year, the company releases approximately 200 software products, each of which requires the creation of 10,000–15,000 pages of text. These text documents must be simultaneously published in 40 different

languages and be acceptable to widely differing cultural and political environments.

### Translation Costs

Changes to texts, however, are not cheap. Roberts estimated that it costs IBM 80 cents for every word that must be changed in a document. For example, an 18,000-page document referred to Taiwan as a country 25,000 times. Certain IBM clients—particularly in China—would have been very upset by that. So, at 80 cents per usage (about \$20,000 total), all references to Taiwan had to be changed.

Corporate publishers like IBM use tracking software (that identifies affected documentation when software is upgraded) and “smart people” (skilled editors and translators) to reduce their documentation costs. Roberts said that the contribution of translators and editors is particularly crucial to developing the source document—the document from which all of the translations into other languages are made. Editor/translators must also keep in mind what brand names may mean in other languages. For example, Roberts joked, when Chevrolet first released the Chevy Nova in 1962 to the North American market, the car’s name worked well. But to the Latin American market, the name meant, “Chevy no go.”

Wrapping up his talk, Roberts explained that in corporate translation, “Chevy no go” and similar blunders are what translators and editors work to

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avoid. “In corporate translation, one wants to avoid the surreal experience.”

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, Roberts and Hausner’s perspectives on translation and editing derive from two separate worlds. But there was clear agreement on three points:

- Much is lost without translation.
- Even more can be lost without good translation.
- Good translation requires a skilled editor who understands both the translation and editing processes. E