

Mission (im)possible?
Translating Finnish literature into Danish

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a survey conducted among a group of Danish translators of Finnish literature. The authors provide an outline of the translators in terms of gender, age, and education, emphasising that all but one have a background in Finnish studies at the University of Copenhagen. The authors also identify what the translators view as the challenges in translating Finnish literature into Danish. Since 2016, it has been impossible to study Finnish at an academic level in Denmark. Although Denmark is one of the countries that translates the largest amount of Finnish literature, the study reveals concerns among translators that the lack of higher education opportunities will negatively affect the transmission of Finnish literature to Denmark. While current translators typically hold a degree in Finnish, the paper suggests that future translators will likely come from different backgrounds, e.g. bilingual individuals or editors working with AI-generated translations.

Keywords

cultural policy; Denmark; FILLI; Finland; literary translation



1. Introduction¹

Denmark and Finland are both Nordic countries, respectively constituting the southern and eastern border of Norden, the North, as this politico-historical concept is traditionally defined (Vikør 1995). The geographical distance between the two countries may seem significant; however, as the curator of a 1969 exhibition titled *Danmark og Finland gennem 800 år* (Federley 1969; Denmark and Finland in 800 years) pointed out, Denmark and Finland have been in close contact and have influenced one another since early historical times, with the Baltic Sea serving less as a barrier than a vehicle of communication (see also Olesen 2017).

Finnish literature² currently flourishes in Denmark. According to data from FILI (the Finnish Literature Exchange, a subdivision of the Finnish Literature Society, SKS), an organisation that supports and promotes the publication of Finnish literature in translation around the world, Denmark is one of the countries that translates the largest quantity of Finnish literature per year (see section 2.2.). Despite this seemingly significant interest in Finland and its literature, however, it is no longer possible to study Finnish through a higher education programme in Denmark. In 2016, the University of Copenhagen eliminated its Finnish studies programme together with other smaller academic disciplines. Ralf Hemmingsen, then-rector of the university, voiced his regret for the decision but explained that the programmes were closed due to cuts in state subsidies (Toft 2016). In Finland, on the other hand, Danish is still an obligatory subject at several universities as part of their Nordic languages programmes³.

In this article, we provide an outline of today's Danish translators of Finnish literature and describe what these professionals regard as the

¹ While this article is the result of a joint effort by the two authors, sections 2.2, 3, 4 and 9 are to be attributed to Lena Dal Pozzo and sections 1, 2.1 and 5-8 to Anna Wegener. The authors would like to thank the eight translators who participated in this research project.

² In this article the term 'literature' is defined broadly as any written work. By Finnish literature we mean, for the purpose of this article, literature written in Finnish, although it could also include works written in Swedish or Sámi.

³ The universities in question are the University of Turku, Åbo Academy and the University of Helsinki. Private email correspondence with Marie-Louise Lind Sørensen, Åbo Academy (13 November 2024).

main challenges involved in transmitting Finnish literature to Denmark as well as what they view as both the short-term and long-term consequences of eliminating Finnish studies. To collect these perspectives, we contacted ten translators of Finnish literature and invited them to participate in a survey addressing these issues, ultimately receiving eight replies in total. This study aligns with other predominantly sociological research conducted in the Nordic countries, which seeks to shed light on the translation profession and its circumstances, such as the work by Aino Heino (2020, 2021).

In conducting this research, we were spurred by the assumption that there is a probable link between the existence of higher education programmes through which students can study a given source language in a given target culture and the quantity and quality of translations of texts written in this source language⁴. As Finnish studies in Denmark were shut down only a decade ago, for the moment it remains too soon to demonstrate such a connection. The translators, however, listed a series of negative consequences to their work springing from the closure of Finnish studies, such as the loss of the university's Finnish Library when it was moved to the Norwegian Forest Finn Museum; they also voiced concerns about who will translate Finnish literature in the future. Indeed, according to the most pessimistic participant, «there will be no translators». Another respondent was more optimistic, suggesting that «[T]here is a future as long as there are bilingual translators available».

The article is divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to the role of translations in the Danish literary system in general and the role of translations of Finnish literature in particular. We use data from FILI to illustrate the volume of translations from Finnish into Danish per year. The data regards the export of Finnish books to Denmark and not the proportion of Finnish literature among all the translations pu-

⁴ Such a link has been postulated for other languages, for instance Danish literature in Italy. Mette Tønnesen (2009, 97) has argued, for example, that in the 1960-1980 period there was a boom in Italian translations of Danish literature. Many of the works were translated directly from Danish. It would not have been possible, Tønnesen claims, to produce a large body of direct translations without a system of education producing experts in Danish. See also Ciaravolo (2022).

blished in Denmark. Finnish is not one of the main source languages of translations into Danish; this role is instead assumed by English and the Scandinavian languages (Swedish and Norwegian) (Schmidt 2023, 18-21; Lindqvist 2015, 10). As a source language, however, it is not among the least frequently used source languages for translations in Denmark⁵. As one of the respondents of the survey pointed out: «Finsk er nok ikke det sprog, der oversættes mindst fra i Danmark. Der er andre landes litteratur, der er endnu mindre repræsenteret på dansk, så det ser ikke så sort ud» (Finnish is probably not the language that is translated from the least in Denmark. There are literatures from other countries that are even less represented in Danish, so it does not look so bad)⁶.

In the second part we turn our attention to FILI. At present, most European countries have established an institutionalised literary export policy and are striving to increase their international distribution (Vimr 2021, 2). Recent research has shown that focused efforts to support the dissemination of national and regional literatures are effective. For example, the quantity of Norwegian and French titles available in Denmark is rising due in part to the financial support publishers can obtain for their publications through NORLA and the Institut Français (Schmidt 2023, 44). Similarly, Finnish literature also benefits from FILI's advantageous translation and publication grants. Therefore, a part of the answer as to why there are currently a large number of Danish translations of Finnish literature is that FILI makes it attractive for Danish publishers to translate Finnish books. FILI is, to rely on Ondrej Vimr's terminology, "pushing" Finnish literature into the Danish target culture (cited from Paloposki 2018, 23). Given the importance of FILI in sustaining the bibliomigrancy (Mani 2014) of Finnish literature, we will briefly introduce this organisation's history and current aims.

In the third part we present the results of the survey carried out using a questionnaire consisting of thirty-five questions. To unearth information about who the current translators of Finnish literature are, a part of the

⁵ At present, there is a lack of statistical data keeping track of the status of Finnish as a source language for translations into Danish among all translations.

⁶ All the translations are by the authors if not otherwise mentioned.

questionnaire featured questions targeting their personal and educational background and their experiences as translators. The answers show that the majority of translators have a background in Finnish studies at the University of Copenhagen, thus making formal language studies a hallmark of Danish translators of Finnish literature.

Since FILI is a key agent in fostering Finnish literature abroad, we also asked the translators how they participate in FILI's initiatives. Although the answers varied, they indicate that FILI has now partially replaced the university as a nodal point for Danish-Finnish literary relations. Last, the survey delves into the translators' ideas about the challenges, both linguistic and cultural, they face in translating Finnish literature into Danish and their bleak view of the future of Finnish literature in Denmark. According to many of the respondents, there is serious uncertainty as to where the mediators of Finnish literature will come from in the future.

2. Translations in Denmark

2.1. Translations in the Danish literary system

According to Yvonne Lindqvist (2015, 14-18; see also Svahn 2025), Scandinavia constitutes a relatively autonomous translation field in the periphery of the global translation field, with Sweden as the consecrating centre. The Swedish scholar relies on Pascale Casanova's world literature theory (2010) according to which translation is an unequal exchange rather than an equal one and takes place in a strongly hierarchical literary space where power dynamics determine which literatures are circulated and translated.

In polysystemic terms the Danish literary system is the most open among the three Scandinavian countries as regards the foreign literature it welcomes in translation (Lindqvist 2015, 5). Lindqvist reports that, in the period from 2001 to 2010, approximately 34 percent of all books published in the categories of fiction, children's and young adult literature, and non-fiction were translations (ivi, 6). English was by far the most prevalent source language in this timespan. The other major source languages – listed here in order of prevalence – were Swedish, German, Norwegian, and French.

In 2023, Johanne Gormsen Schmidt presented her report on the conditions of translated literature in Denmark, the report having been commissioned by The Book Panel under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture⁷. Danish publishers issued more translated fiction than fiction originally written in Danish around 2010. This situation has recently changed, however, as there has been a surge in the production of Danish fiction. Danish titles have now surpassed translated ones. From a numerical point of view, more foreign fiction is published in translation in Denmark than in the past; however, its overall market share has declined. English is still the dominant source language, but the number of titles translated from this language has stagnated while books originally written in Swedish and Norwegian have grown in number, and the same positive trend can also be seen for what the report calls «other languages» (Schmidt 2023, 11). As the report shows, it is particularly smaller publishers who engage in publishing translations from these “other languages” – one of which is Finnish – and some of these publishing houses have even been established with the sole purpose of publishing translations from a particular language or cultural area. As for the reason why the number of translations of English fiction has stagnated, the report provides the partial answer that Danish readers prefer to read a given work in the original English, in some instances, rather than in translation (ivi, 18).

In discussing the importance of grants for the publication of translations in Denmark, the report specifically mentions FILI and Finnish literature (ivi, 44). Danish publishers generally depend on grants from either The Danish Art Foundation (*Statens Kunstfond*) or foreign organisations to publish translations. Typically, a Danish publishing house must be able to secure grants from more than one foundation to be able to issue a translation because the amount awarded by each individual foundation is insufficient to cover costs. The report mentions FILI as an important funder of Finnish literature in Denmark. Contrary to the general trend, FILI's

⁷ The aim of The Book Panel, established in 2014, is to document trends in the Danish book market.

grant programme is quite generous: the grants it awards cover from 50 to 70% of the translation cost as well as about a quarter of printing costs⁸.

As Juliane Wammen, translator from English, Swedish and Norwegian and head of the Danish Translators Association, pointed out in her review of the report, Schmidt's analysis documents the fact that there is an increasing lack of translators from what are termed 'minor' languages:

A sad trend, that the report points out, is that fewer titles are being translated from "minor" language areas, and that this is due, among other things, to a lack of qualified translators from, for example, Turkish, Korean, Chinese and Polish, to name a few. This trend will undoubtedly continue with the many closures of university language departments, and it will take a long time to build up capacity again, if it disappears completely. These "niche" languages require that translators know more than the single language in question or can find other employment within their given language area to maintain their professional skills.⁹

Danish translations of Finnish literature have recently increased and not declined, but the last part of the argument – the difficulty of making a living by translating from a so-called 'niche' language – also pertains to Danish translators of Finnish literature.

2.2. Danish translations of Finnish literature

FILI's role in promoting Finnish literature abroad is evident from the organisation's website. It presents a regularly updated database (Finnish literature in translation) containing information on Finnish, Swedish, and Sámi fiction and non-fiction translations from 1839 to the present. This

⁸ URL: <<https://fili.fi/en/grants/tukimuodot/kaannos-ja-painatustuki-ulkomaisille/>> (12/2025).

⁹ Orig.: «En trist tendens, som rapporten peger på, er desuden, at der oversættes færre titler fra "mindre" sprogområder, og at det bl.a. skyldes manglende kvalificerede oversættere fra fx tyrkisk, koreansk, kinesisk og polsk, for blot at nævne nogle stykker. Den tendens fortsætter uden tvivl med de mange lukninger af universiteternes sprogfag, og det vil tage lang tid at opbygge kapaciteten igen, hvis den først forsvinder helt. Disse "niche"-sprog kræver, at man som oversætter kan flere end det ene sprog, eller kan finde anden beskæftigelse inden for sit sprogområde, som holder ens faglighed ved lige.» (Wammen 2023).

database offers information on all translations of Finnish literature, not only those supported by FILI. Table 1 shows the countries that have published the largest amount of Finnish literature in the last three decades (1995-2025). The first column refers to overall output, which is further detailed for three decades.

1995-2025		1995-2005		2005-2015		2015-2025	
Estonia	891	Estonia	198	Germany	366	Estonia	465
Germany	819	Germany	159	Estonia	278	Germany	344
Sweden	458	Sweden	136	France	166	Denmark	266
Denmark	448	France	81	Sweden	166	Russia	242
Russia	430	Russia	68	Denmark	147	France	213
France	426	Denmark	67	Russia	139	Poland	200
Poland	314	Norway	55	Hungary	129	Sweden	193

Table 1 – Translated Finnish literature per country and decade.

URL: <<https://fili.fi/worldmap/>> (12/2025).

Historically, Danish has always been one of the languages into which Finnish literature is translated. According to the database, 763 Finnish titles were translated into Danish (from Finnish and Swedish) from 1852 to 2025. Disaggregating Finnish, Swedish and Sámi, the three languages accounted for in the database, we obtain a total of 519 titles translated from Finnish, 237 titles translated from Swedish, and zero from a Sámi language. FILI has also supported the indirect translation of seven titles by Finnish authors from English to Danish.

Narrowing down to the last five years, Table 2, also extrapolated from FILI's database, shows the first six languages into which Finnish books were most translated frequently between 2021 and 2025. Notably, Danish is always present and has occupied the third position in the last three years.

2021		2022		2023		2024		2025	
Estonian	59	Estonian	69	Estonian	54	Estonian	50	German	26
Russian	40	German	39	German	44	German	44	Estonian	20
German	32	Russian	35	Danish	36	Danish	40	Danish	18
Polish	31	Polish	25	Polish	22	Polish	32	Italian	13
French	31	Danish	25	English	20	French	30	Polish	12
Danish	26	Swedish	22	Italian, French	19	Hungarian	19	French	12

Table 2 – Languages to which Finnish literature has been translated most in the last five years.
URL: <<https://fili.fi/kirjallisuusvienti/tilastot/>> (12/2025).

Returning to Lindqvist’s argument (cf. section 2.1), it would be interesting to ascertain in the future whether there exists a relatively autonomous translation field characterised by an intensive exchange of translations between Finland and Estonia as well, with Estonia probably playing the role of the dominated party. Importantly, in the 2021-2025 period a larger number of Finnish titles were translated into Danish than into Swedish. This could indicate that Sweden does not function as a consecrating centre, as suggested by Lindqvist, at least not for Finnish literature in Denmark. Since there are now more translations of Finnish literature in Denmark than in Sweden, Danish publishers cannot be relying on Swedish translations to decide which Finnish titles to issue in Denmark.

3. The Finnish literary policy and FILI

Finland’s literary policy demonstrates a robust commitment to internationalising its national literature, with a specific emphasis on the translation and global dissemination of Finnish literature (cf. <<https://fili.fi/worldmap/>>). At the core of this policy is a comprehensive public

support system that recognises literature as one of the key elements of cultural diplomacy, understood as facilitating cultural transmission across an international boundary (Cull 2008, 49) by deploying cultural goods and practices such as literature and translation.

After the Netherlands, Finland was the first country in Europe to institutionalise its translation support programme (Vimr 2021, 2). FILI, operating as part of the Finnish Literature Society (Suomen kirjallisuuden seura, SKS), was founded in 1977 with the aim of promoting Finnish literature (defined as works in all genres written in Finnish, Swedish or Sámi) abroad through multiple means, including extensive support for both translators and editors to foster translations.

The organisation's economic resources derive from three different actors: the Ministry of Education and Culture, various foundations and funds, and the Finnish Literature Society (Kaskela, Koskelainen 2014). As noted by Iris Schwank, FILI director from 2001 to 2015, Kalervo Siikala (1932-2009), the former head of the international department of the Ministry of Education, can be considered the 'father' of FILI (in Kaskela, Koskelainen 2014). Siikala was an innovator who also had a role in the creation of CIMO, the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation that was later incorporated in the National Board of Education (Opetushallitus) in 2017. FILI and CIMO (EDUFI since 2017) cooperate closely on a number of projects, one being the various translators' traineeship programmes. Schwank also reports in the interview in Kaskela and Koskelainen (2014) that early-2000s efforts to promote national literatures abroad, especially in smaller languages like Finnish, lacked the specialisation and differentiation that characterise current initiatives.

FILI's key role in internationalising Finnish literature around the globe involves different but overlapping activities. One of the most relevant programmes is the Translators' Fellowship Seminar that coincides with the Helsinki Book Fair organised every year in October. In 2025, for example, sixty translators and future translators from twenty-five countries participated in this fellowship programme. As reported by the survey's participants, the fellowship seminar is a highly significant event for networking, training, and professional growth. Other FILI focus areas include translation and publication grants, a summer course for beginning

literary translators, mentorship programmes, internships, a translators' book group, etc. FILI views translators as essential cultural mediators and their work is recognised and made visible through awards such as the State Prize for Foreign Translators and the Mikael Agricola Prize, as we can understand from FILI's website¹⁰.

Around one hundred Finnish books in translation were published each year in the 1970s, whereas in recent years that number has tripled or even quadrupled. These numbers suggest that FILI's promotion of Finnish literature has been quite successful. In 2022, the current director of FILI, Tiina Strandén, reported that «an average of 300-400 translations of Finnish literature are published abroad every year, in about forty languages. Last year, a record number of translations were published – no fewer than five hundred translations of Finnish literature, in forty-six languages. At the same time, more new translation rights were sold than in previous years»¹¹.

In 2002, Finland was the guest of honour country at the Gothenburg Book Fair, the event that has long served as the most internationally visible literary fair in the Nordic region; in 2014, it was similarly showcased at the Frankfurt Book Fair under the branding slogan «Finland. Cool» (Mattila 2018). These two events have certainly boosted the visibility of Finnish literature and the volume of its translations abroad.

The increased revenues from books exported abroad are reported below.

¹⁰ URL: <<https://fili.fi/>> (12/2025).

¹¹ URL: <<https://fili.fi/en/finnish-literary-exports-grew-by-four-percent/>> (12/2025).

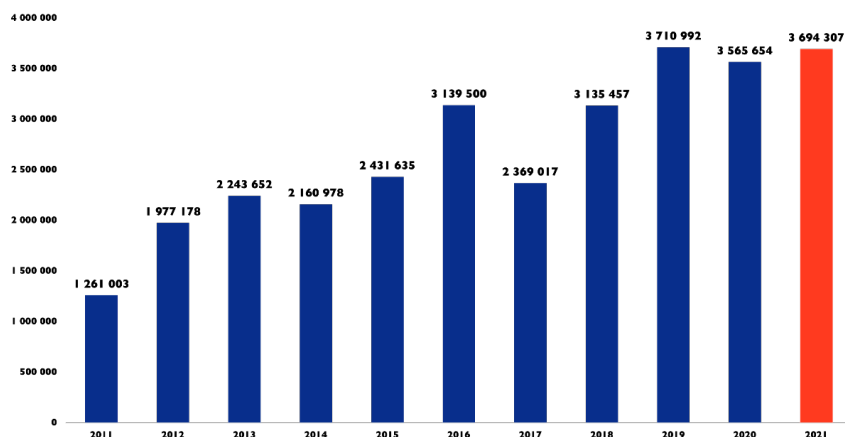


Figure 1 – Growth of Finnish literary export (2022).

URL: <<https://fili.fi/en/finnish-literary-exports-grew-by-four-percent/>>

(Press release, 7.12.22, accessed 12/2025).

The Finlandia Prize, awarded annually in fiction, non-fiction, and children’s and young adult literature, plays a key role in signalling literary excellence and frequently determines which texts are prioritised for international promotion. Finnish publishers, including WSOY, Tammi, Teos, Schildts & Söderströms, and Elina Ahlback, work in close collaboration with FILI and literary agents such as the Helsinki Literary Agency to facilitate foreign rights sales¹², particularly in major translation markets.

4. The questionnaire

As the main aim of the survey was to gather information about the translators’ experiences, opinions, and perspectives on the current situation, the design is qualitative (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We formulated an online survey with thirty-five open-ended or multiple-choice questions. The

¹² The major agencies for Finnish literature in the Nordic Countries are Bonnier Rights Sweden, Copenhagen Literary Agency, Hedlund Agency, Kontext Agency, and Salomonsson Agency (Salmenoja 2021).

questionnaire was constructed on survio.com and made available online¹³. We emailed a link for the questionnaire to the ten translators who FILI lists as translators of Finnish literature into Danish and invited them to participate in our research project¹⁴. The questions were written in English, but the respondents were also given the option of responding in Danish if they felt more comfortable doing so. Specific answers cannot be traced back to any individual person, as the questionnaire was anonymous.

The thirty-five questions can be grouped as summarised in Table 3.

Sections	
1-2	Personal information (age and gender)
3-7	Educational background
8	Self-assessed proficiency in Finnish
9-14	Relationship with Finland
15-20	Experience as a translator
21-22	Collaboration with other translators
23-24	View on the linguistic and cultural difficulties involved in translating Finnish literature into Danish
25-27	Contacts with FILI
28-31	View on the general knowledge of Finnish literature in Denmark
32	View on the role of translators of Finnish literature in Denmark
33	View on the impact of AI technologies on translators
34-35	View on the closure of Finnish studies at the University of Copenhagen and its short- and long-term effects

Table 3 – Survey for translators of Finnish literature into Danish.

¹³ The entire questionnaire can be found in the appendix to this article.

¹⁴ The names and addresses of the translators were found on Fili's «Virtual Community for Translators», using the search function «Search translators» (URL: <<https://kaantopiiri.fi/en/search-translators/>>, accessed 12/2025).

We received eight complete answers in total, and these constitute the basis for our presentation of the profile of Danish translators of Finnish literature and their views on the challenges of translating Finnish literature into Danish in terms of both obstacles stemming from the differences between the two languages and cultures, and the institutional context for translation activity. As outlined above, this context has changed dramatically in the last decade due to the elimination of university-level Finnish studies in Denmark.

In the following we present the results of the survey by organising the questions and participants' answers into four main themes: 1) the translators, 2) the challenges, 3) involvement with FILI, and 4) the short- and long-term consequences of eliminating Finnish Studies. We present the answers not by following the order of the questionnaire itself but by grouping the translators' feedback into the above-mentioned thematic areas.

5. The translators

Age, gender and education

The mean age of the study participants was 52 years, with the oldest participant born in 1953 and the youngest in 1989. Five respondents indicated their gender as female, two as male and one as other. Translating Finnish literature into Danish is thus primarily a female occupation.

All the translators except for one had studied Finnish at the University of Copenhagen and hold either BA or MA degrees in Finnish. The only person who did not have a university degree had instead studied Finnish at Folkeuniversitet (The People's University) in Copenhagen and through an evening school and education centre in Finland. All the degree-holding respondents had deepened their knowledge of Finnish by carrying out study periods in Finland of varying length, e.g. by attending summer language schools or studying at Finnish universities. One of the participants had an MA degree in Finnish from the University of Oulu, having chosen this university because, as the respondent stated, it is positioned in a part of the country where there is no Swedish minority, and the local dialect is easy to understand.

Four of the eight participants also held a university degree in a subject other than Finnish. The group of translators thus consists of highly educated individuals with a specialised knowledge of Finnish. Indeed, most of them – six of the eight respondents – considered themselves to be ‘proficient’ in Finnish, whereas the remaining two judged their own language competences to be ‘advanced’.

Relationship with Finland

Different factors had drawn the translators to Finland and Finnish. In general, only a minority – just two respondents – had embarked on a study of Finnish because they had Finnish relatives, such as a Finnish father raised in Denmark.

Two respondents answered that their general interest in languages was the primary motivation, specifying that «finsk er et meget anderledes og lingvistisk interessant sprog» (Finnish is a very different and linguistically interesting language). One respondent had travelled with his or her parents to Finland as a child, thus taking on a strong Nordic identity, while another participant indicated a romantic relationship with a Finn as the reason for choosing to begin studying Finnish. In three cases, music, literature, and art had opened the translators’ eyes to Finland. One had been a fan of the Finnish rock band HIM, and this had prompted them to abandon the study of Italian to instead study Finnish; another participant had been an avid reader of Tolkien, while still another had been fascinated by Finnish art photography.

All but one of the translators had lived continuously in the country for at least three months and two of them had lived there permanently, since 2013 and 2018 respectively. As for the participants who lived in Denmark – the majority – they all travelled to Finland on a regular basis, four of them indicating that they visited the country «twice a year or more often».

Translator experience

Although united by the fact that they translate Finnish literature into Danish, the respondents have very different experiences as regards the

numbers of books they have translated, the languages from which they translate (besides Finnish), and the genres they specialise in. Translating is an occasional activity for some of the respondents, whereas for others it is a full-time occupation. At the lower end of the spectrum, we find two translators who have translated only two and four titles respectively, and at the other end translators with numerous titles under their belts.

The translators translate not only from Finnish but also from other source languages: primarily Swedish and Norwegian (four and three of the respondents, respectively) but also English and German. Five of the eight participants stated that they are specialised in children's literature, while two respondents point to poems as their forte. The majority indicate "other" as their key specialisation, which probably means that they primarily translate fiction.

These data suggest that it is not easy to make a living as a translator of Finnish literature. As one respondent stated, «[T]he competition is quite tight in this job». To make ends meet, translators must generally either translate from other source languages besides Finnish or have other forms of employment. Another participant also lamented the fact that «the payment for Finnish-Danish translations, like other language pairs [...] is probably too low». This finding is in line with Schmidt's 2023 report according to which translators from what are termed «exotic languages» (*fremmedarte-de sprog*), such as Japanese, complain that they are unable to live off their translations alone (Schmidt 2023, 50-51).

Collaboration

For most of the respondents, it is important to collaborate with colleagues. Five of them stated that they collaborate with other translators from Finnish, whereas three indicate that they do not. The former group communicates with one another when they have doubts and questions regarding a translation; they also proofread each other's texts, discuss fees, and other work-related matters. Contacting a colleague for help in finding work is also a form of collaboration they mentioned: «I have asked other translators if they had any work for me, or at least knowledge of where to find some». The examples of collaboration offered by the participants were

mostly of the informal, noninstitutional type, but two of them recalled how they used to participate in university-based seminars about translation from Finnish to Danish, as reported by one of the translators:

We try to meet either in Helsinki for the book fair via FILI [...]. Earlier we also arranged courses/network meetings for Finnish-Danish translators in Copenhagen at the Finnish Cultural Institute, which originally happened through the Finnish department at the University of Copenhagen, but now this requires that we translators find the time to arrange the meeting ourselves and also do the fundraising on our own. We hope to pick it up again at some point.

As this answer shows, the Finnish Department at the University of Copenhagen used to organise courses or networking activities for the translators, but since the department shut down this initiative has fallen into disuse. The above-cited answer is in line with another reply from the same participant pointing out that the Helsinki Book Fair, and the translator training organised there by FILI, has come to replace the University of Copenhagen as an important place where translators meet, network and build and develop their identity as translators:

Also, courses held by Finnish Literary Exchange FILI at the annual book fair in Helsinki are paramount for my identity as a literary translator as a place where I network and hear news from the field (especially now that the Finnish Department at the University of Copenhagen is no longer there to act as social glue for the Danish-Finnish network).

6. The challenges

Linguistic challenges

Danish and Finnish are, as is well-known, a North Germanic and a Finno-Ugric language, respectively, and as such they present morphological and syntactic differences that pose numerous challenges for translators. One of the most frequent problems mentioned by this survey's participants is the frequent use of passive structures, the lack of differentiation between definite and indefinite forms, and the lack of specification of gender in Finnish. One participant even found that it was sometimes necessary to

contact the author to find out whether a character in a novel is female or male, since this cannot always be gauged from the context.

Another participant compared the difficulties of translating Finnish literature to the ease of translating Swedish or Norwegian texts: «Strukturelt er finsk et meget anderledes sprog end dansk, så man skal ofte bygge sætningerne op 'forfra'. Til forskel fra, når man oversætter fra f.eks. svensk og norsk, hvor sætningsstrukturen er givet på forhånd» (Structurally, Finnish is a very different language than Danish which is why one must often recreate the sentences from zero. This is different than translating from Swedish and Norwegian, where the sentence structure is given in advance).

Yet another respondent noted that structural differences between the languages reflect different ways of perceiving the world and continued: «I am grateful that I have a university degree in Finnish, that included exchange studies in Finland, otherwise I do not see how I could have mastered Finnish at this very high level, which is crucial for proper literary translation».

Among the differences pointed out by this respondent was the following: «Finnish is often more precise with spatial expressions and verbal precision, whereas Danish uses adjectives descriptively. Finnish describes what is seen, Danish focuses on the process between a and b».

Another translator indicated the lack of translation tools, e.g. satisfactory dictionaries, as a major obstacle to translating Finnish texts into Danish: «[E]gentlig er manglen på gode ordbøger mellem finsk og dansk en daglig udfordring, fordi man må gå via fx svensk eller engelsk og kan bruge meget tid på at lede efter specifikke termer» (Actually, the lack of good dictionaries between Finnish and Danish is a daily challenge, because you must pass through Swedish or English, for example, and can spend a lot of time looking for specific terms).

This observation also appeared in another participant's answer when they simply wrote: «[N]umero uno is the lack of dictionaries».

This latter respondent also pointed out that the Danish language is heavily influenced by English. This means that a Finnish term must sometimes be translated by using an English one:

[The] Danish language has become so infested by English words, that one is nearly compelled to use English terms in a Danish translation! It seems odd, when considering that Finnish [...] has up till now been kept quite pure as a

language. If English terms are to be used in the everyday language they have typically been Finnified, e.g. the word 'team' has become 'tiimi', or 'feeling' = 'fiili'.

While the many Anglicisms¹⁵ in Danish may not constitute a translation problem for all translators, they did for this respondent.

Cultural challenges

Danes are generally quite ignorant of Finland and Finnish culture, according to the respondents, and the translators identified this as one of their challenges. The translators pointed out that one of the things they are ignorant about is the status of Swedish as the country's second national language:

Danes insist on calling Helsinki for 'Helsinki' and e.g. using 'Helsinki Universitet', although it reads on the main door (and is announced in the metro train at that station as) Helsingin yliopisto – Helsingfors universitet – University of Helsinki. It is a detail, but it makes translations difficult.

This lack of knowledge about Finland and Finnish culture means that translators must often give readers a helping hand with interpreting *realia*:

It can be a challenge, if a text refers too much to prominent people from the Finnish cultural establishment or to the general debate about certain topics. At the same time, Finland is still somewhat distant for Danes, so some things should perhaps be described a bit in the translation, to make sure that the reader understands what it is about.¹⁶

Another respondent wrote:

¹⁵ Gottlieb 2020, 32: «Any individual or systemic language feature adapted or adopted from English, or inspired or boosted by English models, used in intralingual communication in a speech community in which English is not the home language».

¹⁶ Orig.: «Det kan være en udfordring, hvis der refereres i for høj grad til finske kulturpersonligheder eller den almene debat om forskellige emner. Samtidig er Finland stadig lidt fjernt for danskere, så nogle ting skal måske beskrives lidt i oversættelsen, for at læseren kan forstå, hvad det handler om».

I think there will always be difficulties when it comes to translating collective memory between our cultures – e.g. the still existing trauma of the Civil war and WW2, the meaning and feeling of nature and things our respective cultures have added value to. Sometimes you have to add context, preferably seamlessly adding a word here and there.

According to the translators, Danes are generally not well acquainted with Finnish literature: «I find it unlikely that the common Danish citizen has much, if any, knowledge of Finnish literature» a respondent stated. Danes know a few star authors – Sofi Oksanen being the most famous – but that is about it. As another respondent wrote:

People in Denmark have very little knowledge of Finnish literature. Now I am translating Mika Waltari into Danish, who is considered one of Finland's greatest authors and is also the most translated internationally – many Danes do not even know him. However, primarily older people know *The Egyptian*.¹⁷

One respondent, however, found that there are reasons for optimism. According to this translator, Danes are becoming more aware of Finnish literature because more Finnish texts are being translated now than before. The respondent also mentioned that the website <litteratursiden.dk>, maintained by the Danish libraries, has a page dedicated to Finland in literature¹⁸. This page contains reviews of thirty-seven books of Finnish literature, in this case meaning works written in either Finnish or Swedish¹⁹. Still another respondent pointed out that Danes have become more interested in Finnish

¹⁷ Orig.: «Folk i Danmark har meget lidt kendskab til finsk litteratur. P.t. oversætter jeg Mika Waltari til dansk, som jo regnes for én af Finlands største forfattere og også er internationalt mest oversat – mange danskere kender ham ikke engang. Primært ældre mennesker kender dog *Sinuhe, ægypteren*».

¹⁸ Unfortunately, this website was closed on 1 July 2024. The content can still be accessed, but the site is no longer updated.

¹⁹ The authors of these works are the following: Monika Fagerholm, Kari Hotakainen, Juha Itkonen, Olli Jalonen, Tove Jansson, Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen, Juhani Karila, Katja Kettu, Aleksis Kivi, Rosa Liksom, Laura Lindstedt, Sofi Oksanen, Arto Paasilinna, Riikka Pulkkinen, Petra Rautiainen, Mikko Rimminen, Johanna Sinisalo, Arttu Tuominen, Quynh Tran, Nina Wähä, Kjell Westö. The page additionally features a review of a 2017 translation of *Kalevala*. This translation, authored by Hilikka and Bent Søndergaard, was initially published in 1994; however, the 2017 edition also included a translation of the 23rd song by Erik Skyum-Nielsen.

literature during the last few decades, and this interest is now being fuelled by the current geopolitical situation as Danes turn their attention away from the United States and more towards their Nordic neighbours in general and the history of Finland specifically to understand how this country has survived the threat to its survival represented by Russia (Böss 2025).

7. Involvement with FILI

The respondents were involved with FILI in various ways, and to varying degrees. One of the more occasional translators wrote: «I have attended a presentation once at the Turku university after I finished my studies. I just receive [FILI's] newsletter. I am not sure they would approve any grants for me, because I receive work so seldom».

Another respondent did not participate in any of FILI's initiatives because s/he lived over 600 km north of Helsinki, geographical distance thus constituting an obstacle to participation. Other translators, however, regularly took part in FILI's courses and seminars:

I try to be as involved with FILI as possible, i.e. participate in courses in Helsinki and work together on the export of Finnish literature (although I do not have the time to participate e.g. in the online book club). If it were not for FILI – and the Finnish Department at University of Copenhagen!), I would not be a literary translator today. The amazing network of translators and FILI's active encouragement and practical [*word missing*] gives me a sense of belonging, an identity as a literary translator.

Another respondent wrote that FILI generally financed the translation fee: «My fee is almost always covered by the Finnish side (publishers apply for this). Furthermore, I have regularly taken part in seminars and have attended the Helsinki Book Fair several times, all made possible by FILI»²⁰.

It was evident from the replies that the Helsinki Book Fair is a major event in the professional lives of the most active translators. It was not

²⁰ Orig.: «Mit honorar bliver stort set altid støttet fra finsk side (forlagene søger om dette). Derudover har jeg jævnligt deltaget i seminarer og været flere gange på bogmessen i Helsinki takket være FILI».

clear whether they had all enrolled in FILI's fellowship programme, but the following answer indicates that some of them had:

[I] participate in their annual seminar in connection with the Helsinki Book Fair. I have also participated in other of their events and courses for translators, especially when I lived in Finland. I receive newsletters from them and am in general email contact.²¹

Going back in time, FILI also organised seminars at the University of Copenhagen for prospective translators while the programme in Finnish Studies was still in existence. Five of the translators had participated in these seminars more than once. At that time, therefore, FILI had specifically reached out to Danish students of Finnish to make contact with and possibly mould future translators. Not all the survey participants recalled what the seminars were about; in the views of some they were just presentations of what FILI does, but others had found them inspiring and hugely formative:

They were important as networking possibilities that helped assert my identity as a translator, but also offered concrete learning through exercises and discussions and the formidable coaching from the head of the seminar – but also via the visiting speakers such as Mette Holm translating from Japanese, a coworking session with two Finnish spoken word/rap artists etc.

By inviting Mette Holm, arguably Denmark's most renowned translator of Japanese literature, FILI positioned Finnish as a language that presents challenges in terms of both the linguistic complexities it poses to translators and its (niche) status within the Danish book market.

8. The short- and long-term consequences of eliminating Finnish Studies

The respondents reflected on why the programme in Finnish Studies was shut down in 2016, pointing to both financial and political/ideological

²¹ Orig.: «[J]eg deltager i deres årlige seminar i forbindelse med Helsinki Bogmesse. Har også deltaget i andre af deres arrangementer og kurser for oversættere, særligt da jeg boede i Finland. Får nyhedsbreve fra dem og er i generel mailkontakt».

motives. The word ‘money’ was indeed recurrent in their answers. Basically, one respondent stated, there were too few students:

A political and mostly financial decision. I was the last master’s degree graduate from the university and I graduated alone. There were simply not enough students graduating. Thus, the study simply was not profitable enough to keep it running.

Other respondents, however, also tied the decision to political/ideological motives, particularly a prevailing societal view of the value of the humanities in general and language learning in particular. In Denmark, some respondents asserted, it is widely held – also among politicians – that the only language worth learning is English. One participant stated:

Oh well, that is a very long story, but the university wanted to save money and the disregard for the value of knowing languages and thus being able to understand other people(s) and cultures has been evident for years. The hardest thing to understand is that it is thought that it has more value to study a mainstream subject i.e. English, although all reports showed, that holders of a degree in Finnish were all employed afterwards, and most of them within their actual field of study.

This was not the only respondent to disagree with the view that candidates holding a degree in Finnish were destined for unemployment; another of the survey participants also made this point. Commenting on the reasons as to why Finnish studies was shut down, this latter respondent wrote: «It was a cost-cutting manoeuvre based on the reasoning that small academic fields are not profitable, and an idea that we were only educated for unemployment, which has proven to be untrue»²².

According to the translators, the decision to close Finnish studies has already had and will continue to have negative consequences. We will group the consequences listed by the translators into two categories: a) Loss of a social environment, a knowledge hub, and a point of contact between the academic world and wider society; and b) a possible lack of competent translators in the future.

²² Orig.: «Det var en sparemanøvre ud fra en tankegang om, at små fag ikke er rentable, og en idé om, at vi kun blev uddannet til arbejdsløshed, hvilket jo har vist sig ikke at være rigtigt».

The move to eliminate Finnish studies has meant the loss not only of a channel for educating academic experts in Finnish, but also, to quote the expression used by one of the translators above, «the social glue for the Finnish-Danish experts». The university did not only cater to education per se; it also served as a meeting point for the translators after their degree and a place where they could gather inspiration and knowledge by using the huge university book collection known as the Finnish library that was relocated to Norway after 2016. At the same time, the university also served as nodal point between the world of Finnish experts and Danish society: «[A]lso, many sectors used to contact the Finnish Department and now there is no point of entry for enquiries = loss of contact».

By shutting down Finnish studies, there is a real risk, some of the respondents claimed, that Denmark will run out of competent translators in the future. One participant wrote:

Knowledge, knowhow, and language skills are lost. You cannot self-study Finnish as it is a quite complicated language. We will lack people that know more about Finland than what you get from media. So, a lot will be lost in cultural exchange. There will be no translators. I edited a novel that had been translated by AI. There were so many mistakes, because AI is not able to translate Finnish properly. It is too complicated.

Another claimed:

Right now, the effects are not so visible, because we translators know each other, and FILI helps us keep in contact, but at some point, when we retire and new translators have not been trained, the high level of linguistic and cultural proficiency will disappear, and there will be a lack of qualified translators. AI can translate manuals but not convey human emotions.

AI technologies may replace human translators, but the respondents stress that Finnish is too complicated a language to be successfully translated by AI and that computer technologies cannot in any case convey the human emotions of literature²³.

²³ There are no official statistics as to how many books are translated by AI in Denmark per year as the practice is subject to taboo. It is not illegal to publish a book that has been translated by AI, but a translator who has post-edited a book translated by AI is not entitled

Others pointed out that future translators might be bilingual individuals:

I do not think there will be new translators after the existing ones. Not like now when it is Danes who learn Finnish. Then it will be like before, where the person had grown up with both languages. But they are one in a million, and that is actually not the optimal translator, since the person must be strongest in Danish.²⁴

If the current translators retire [...] it will be very difficult. The translator needs to be nearly 100% bilingual and have completed the relevant studies at the same time. The Danish community in Finland is very small (perhaps 350-450 persons) while the Finnish community in Denmark is somewhat larger (I guess some 2000-2500 persons), but migration between the two countries is less than in earlier times, and that may have a negative effect.

Another respondent was more optimistic, not seeing a necessary link between the closure of Finnish studies and a lack of competent translators in the future:

I am uncertain about this. There are not educated people on a university level who can translate in the future, but that does not necessarily mean that there will not be any translators in the future. People can learn the language in other ways, and some are bilingual. But it could of course be a consequence of the cancelling that translators will not be educated in the future.²⁵

to receive 'bibliotekspenge' (library money) from the state, i.e. the payment due to creators (authors, illustrators, translators and others) from the government to compensate for the free loan of their books by public libraries. In 2024, the newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* published an article on the phenomena of publishing books translated via AI in Denmark. One publisher, Svane & Bilgrav, openly stated that they translate foreign works using ChatGPT, but at the same time stressed that they abstain from claiming the abovementioned payment from the government. See Mikkelsen, Conradsen, Mortensen (2024).

²⁴ Orig.: «Jeg tror ikke, der kommer nye oversættere efter de eksisterende. Ikke som nu hvor det er danskere, der lærer finsk. Så bliver det som førhen, hvor vedkommende var vokset op med begge sprog. Men de er en ud af en million, og det er faktisk ikke den optimale oversætter, da vedkommende skal være stærkest i dansk».

²⁵ Orig.: «Jeg er usikker på dette. Der bliver ikke uddannet folk på universitetsniveau, som kan oversætte i fremtiden – men det betyder ikke nødvendigvis, at der ikke vil være oversættere i fremtiden. Folk kan lære sproget på andre måder, og nogle er tosprogede. Men det kan selvfølgelig godt være en konsekvens af nedlukningen, at man ikke får uddannet oversættere i fremtiden».

For another respondent, the absence of higher education opportunities could affect not only the number of Danish translators specialising in Finnish literature but also the overall Danish interest in Finland. The response was rather pessimistic: «To be honest, I think Danish people will care less about Finnish culture. Unfortunately. But I cannot say with any certainty».

9. Final remarks

Drawing on qualitative survey data from Danish translators of Finnish literature, this article has examined the conditions under which Finnish literature is translated into Danish within a Nordic cultural policy framework characterised by strong institutional mediation (FILI) and public support. The Nordic countries share a cultural policy paradigm involving significant public funding, institutional mediation, and a high level of cultural participation, as well as a relatively comparable literary field structure in which translation plays a central role (Bourdieu 1993; Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland 2017; Nordic Council of Ministers in Grunfelder, Rispling, Norlén 2018).

The survey conducted for this study suggests that the current vitality of Finnish literature in Denmark is largely sustained by two interrelated factors: the legacy of university-based Finnish studies and the strong institutional support provided by FILI. Most active Danish translators of Finnish literature were trained at the University of Copenhagen and have developed their linguistic and cultural competence through formal education combined with prolonged stays in Finland. At the same time, FILI has emerged as a crucial nexus for Danish-Finnish literary exchange, providing as it does financial support to translators and editors, professional training, and networking opportunities. In several respects, it seems that FILI took over the functions that were previously fulfilled by the university programmes, after 2016, and is nowadays considered a kind of knowledge hub and meeting place for translators.

However, the findings also point to clear vulnerabilities in the current system. The closure of Finnish studies has already entailed the loss of an institutional environment which functioned not only as a site of education but also as 'social glue' connecting translators, scholars, cultural institutions,

and the wider Danish public. The disappearance of this academic anchor has reduced access to specialised resources such as the Finnish library collection. While FILI's initiatives partially compensate for this loss, they cannot replace university-level language education as a systematic training ground for future translators.

The question posed in this article's title therefore suggests a differentiated answer. In the short term, the Finnish-to-Danish translation sector is clearly in good health at present. Danish is currently among the languages into which Finnish literature is most frequently translated, and experienced translators continue to mediate Finnish texts with a high level of linguistic and cultural competence. In the longer term, however, the situation appears far more uncertain. Several respondents expressed concern that, once the current generation of translators retires, there may be no clear pathway for training new translators with Danish as their strongest language. Although bilingual individuals and alternative learning routes may partly fill this gap, the survey respondents widely emphasised that literary translation from Finnish requires an exceptionally high level of linguistic precision and cultural insight that is difficult to attain without formal academic training.

The translators' scepticism towards AI-based translation further underlines this point. While technological tools may assist with certain types of texts, the respondents unanimously rejected the idea that AI could adequately translate Finnish literary prose, particularly given the language's structural complexity and the importance of conveying cultural memory, nuance, and stylistic voice. In this sense, the future of Finnish literature in Danish remains closely tied to the availability of highly trained human translators.

Finally, this study brings new empirical data on the translators' perspectives and highlights their importance as a source of knowledge to shed light on issues that can be obscured in macro-level analyses of translation flows. By foregrounding the experiences of translators, the article demonstrates how institutional decisions – such as the closure of smaller language programmes – can have long-term consequences for cultural mediation (and ultimately literary policy) that extend beyond immediate economic considerations.

When Schwank took over the directorship of FILI, she reoriented the organisation's focus towards the actors most essential to the export of

literature, namely translators. As she remarked, «even if we had the finest literature and funding amounting to a billion euros, we would have nothing without translators» (Schwank in Kaskela, Koskelainen 2014, 104)²⁶. The Danish case examined here suggests that sustaining the translation of Finnish literature – and this can be generalised for all literatures known as ‘minor’ – ultimately depends on not only strong support schemes but also the continued possibility of gaining linguistic and cultural expertise in institutional spaces such as universities where such expertise can be cultivated and maintained.

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²⁶ Our translation of the original quote: «Sillä vaikka meillä olisi miten hienoa kirjallisuutta ja rahoitusta miljardi euroa, meillä ei olisi mitään ilman kääntäjiä».

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Appendix

Survey for translators of Finnish literature into Danish

Personal information

- 1) Gender (*F, M, other*)
- 2) Year of birth

Education

- 3) Do you have a university degree in Finnish language/literature?
(*BA, MA, PhD, no, I do not*)
- 4) Do you have a university degree in a subject other than Finnish?
(*yes, no*)
- 5) Where did you study Finnish?
- 6) Please indicate the year in which you began studying Finnish and your age at that time.
- 7) For how long did you study Finnish? (*1-2 years, 3 years, 4 years, 5 years or more*)

Finnish language

- 8) How would you describe your own competence in Finnish?
(*Proficient: I frequently speak Finnish, and I can easily communicate, read, and understand a wide range of texts and recognise implicit meanings;*
advanced: I do not speak it that frequently, but I have good comprehension of both oral and written language and different registers;
good: I can read different kind of texts, but I do not always understand intratextual meanings and I also use sources in other languages.)

Relationship to Finland

- 9) How did you become interested in Finnish and Finland?
- 10) Do you have Finnish relatives? (*yes/no*)
- 11) Do you have relatives living in Finland? (*yes/no*)
- 12) How often do you travel to Finland? (*very seldom, every three years, every other year, once a year, twice a year or more often*)
- 13) Have you ever lived in Finland for more than three months?
- 14) If yes, please indicate when, where and why.

Translator experience

- 15) What are the source languages from which you translate?
- 16) How did you become a translator from Finnish?
- 17) How do you keep yourself up to date about new books and publications in Finland?
- 18) Finland being a bilingual country, do you also translate Finnish books written in Swedish or in one of the minority languages of Finland?
- 19) How many books have you translated from Finnish to Danish? (*1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or more*).
- 20) Are you specialised in the translation of particular genres or books for a particular audience, e.g. children's literature?
- 21) Do you collaborate with other translators from Finnish into Danish?
- 22) If yes, in what way?
- 23) What would you consider the main linguistic difficulties in translating Finnish literature into Danish?
- 24) What would you consider the main cultural difficulties in translating Finnish literature into Danish?

Collaboration with FILI

- 25) How are you involved with FILI? (e.g. do you participate in their translation workshops, apply for grants, etc.)
- 26) Did you participate in the seminars organised by FILI at the University of Copenhagen before Finnish studies were closed in 2016?
- 27) What did the seminars consist of and how did they improve your translator skills?

Finnish literature in Denmark – today and in the future

- 28) How would you describe the general knowledge of Finnish literature in Denmark?
- 29) What do you do to promote Finnish literature in Denmark?
- 30) Who chooses the titles you translate (*you, the publisher, someone else*)?
- 31) What do you see as the future of Finnish literature in Denmark?

- 32) How do you see the role of Danish translators of Finnish literature being in ten years from now?
- 33) Do you think your work is being threatened by AI technologies?
(*yes, a bit, yes, a lot, no, I do not know*)
- 34) What do you consider to be the effects – both short term and long term – of the closure of Finnish studies at the University of Copenhagen?
- 35) Why do you think this decision to close it was taken?