Getting published while foreign

By Ingrid Piller | March 26, 2018 | Literacies

On International Women’s Day I explored why female academics publish less than their male peers. Academic journal submissions by female economics researchers face greater scrutiny and take longer to get published, as a study by Erin Hengel has found. Successful women learn to anticipate greater scrutiny than their male peers and eventually write better; a quality improvement that comes at the expense of quantity.

Unpublished manuscripts from the estate of Hans Natonek (Source: Arts in exile)

The data for Hengel’s study come from published journal articles and that constitutes a limitation because publication is the exception rather than the rule: the majority of submissions – both for academic and non-academic publication – are rejected.

Systematic knowledge of rejected authorship is extremely scarce. Rejection is ostensibly based on the quality of a manuscript; but it is reasonable to assume that the identity of the author also plays a role and that female, non-white or working-class authors are more likely to have their manuscripts rejected.

A study of the archives of the US trade publisher Houghton Mifflin sheds light on this question. The researcher, Yulija Komska, examines the relationship between indicators of foreignness and manuscript rejection during the period of World War II. The period lends itself to this kind of examination as many of the European refugees arriving in the USA during that time were intellectuals and had been writers back home. Most of them failed miserably in their attempts to reestablish their careers in a new country and through a new language, as I previously showed with reference to the Bavarian exile Oskar Maria Graf.
Komska presents some stark figures: during the period under examination Houghton Mifflin received anywhere between 150 and 300 manuscript submissions per month but signed up only one or two of these. In other words, the rejection rate was above 99%. Rejection was for the same reasons that manuscripts get rejected today: they were poorly written, they were dull, they were not timely or they did not fit with the publisher’s list.

However, as the researcher shows, quality had an accent. What does that mean? Komska defines “accented writing” as narrative themes and writing styles that were perceived as unmarketable.

First and foremost among accented writing were indicators of foreignness. A whole body of work that never saw publication were accounts of the anti-Jewish pogroms of the early 20th century in the Russian empire and of the migration experiences of the refugees these produced. Editors and reviewers routinely denigrated such migration stories as “painfully Jewish, dull, not our book,” “monotonously tragic and so completely unrelieved by anything humorous or un-Jewish” or “a screwball book by a screwball Russian” (quoted in Komska, 2017, p. 285f.).

Writing with a foreign accent was not only the product of the author’s migration experience but also their class background, as Komska shows by comparing the reception of the refugees from Russia in the early 20th century to that of the refugees from the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. This new cohort of displaced authors, mostly German-speaking Jews, were more likely to come from bourgeois backgrounds than their Yiddish- and Russian-speaking predecessors of a generation earlier. In response to the submissions of this new group of migrant authors “racist remarks receded” (Komska, 2017, p. 287).

Hans Natonek, for instance, had been one of the foremost literary critics of Weimar Germany and head of the feuilleton of Neue Leipziger Zeitung, a major national newspaper, when he arrived in the USA in 1941 after an almost decade-long odyssey from one European refuge to another. He submitted a memoir of his refugee experience and was described by reviewers as a “nice human being with a good clear intelligence” (quoted in Komska, 2017, p. 288). Even so, he was still rejected by Houghton Mifflin but received a contract for his autobiography In search of myself from another publisher.

In search of myself describes the author’s struggles with reestablishing himself through the medium of the English language in a language that shows no traces of that struggle. The reason for that is that the book is a translation of Natonek’s German original. When migrant manuscripts were favorably considered, translations seem to have been preferred over English-language publications with an accent, i.e. manuscripts that showed traces of late language learning. Describing an author as “not yet at home in the English language” (quoted in Komska, 2017, p. 288) meant rejection.

Refugees’ “broken English” could cancel out even the most extensive cultural capital, as was the case with the Mann family. While Houghton Mifflin did sign on a number of books by Erika and Klaus Mann, they rejected a manuscript by Golo Mann because of its “German overtone” (quoted in Komska, 2017, p. 289).

Incidentally, concerns with accented writing were not restricted to migrant writing but also extended to the presence of dialects and other non-standard forms of English, which were also viewed negatively.
The researcher concludes that “it was accents – wide-ranging, all-pervasive, far-reaching – more than language per se that worried Houghton Mifflin the most” (Komska, 2017, p. 292). This trade press did not so much enforce monolingualism – manuscripts in languages other than English could be translated after all – as it homogenized linguistic, ethnic and class differences into one single “native” white middle-class idiom.

Reference


Author

Ingrid Piller

Dr Ingrid Piller, FAHA, is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Ingrid intercultural communication, bilingual education and the sociolinguistics of language learning and multilingual globalization.