



Coping with uncertainty, abundance and strife: Decision-making processes of Dutch acquisition editors in the global market for translations

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Abstract

This article analyzes the decision-making processes of Dutch editors involved in the acquisition of translation rights. It situates their actions, first, by mapping the Dutch literary field, revealing three broad types of publishers. That said, editors at all three types of publishers confront similar problems and adopt somewhat similar strategies. In their decision-making, editors face three problems as the result of increasing globalization: an excess of new titles; uncertainty over the nature and quality of new titles; and strong competition for new titles. Following all stages of the decision-making process, this article shows how these cultural producers make decisions in a global arena. For example, editors cope with these challenges through a decentralized network that is transnational. This leads to increasing isomorphism between literary fields in different nations. Also, editors assess the position of books, publishing and authors in transnational fields in order to acquire books that correspond to their publisher's own field position and catalogue. The catalogue thus becomes a marker of symbolic capital and identity in the global arena. Hence, this paper shows the utility of drawing on both neo-institutional theory (e.g., isomorphism) and field theory (e.g., symbolic capital) so as to make sense of cultural production.

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1. Introduction

Publishing is a risky and uncertain business. Those primarily charged with selecting books and authors to publish (i.e., acquisition editors) confront an excess of new titles and authors that are available; an uncertainty about the nature, quality and marketability of these books; a ferocious

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competition for the “best” new titles; and the reality that only a small fraction of published books prove to be successful. These are the classic problems of cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Peterson and Anand, 2004).

The uncertainty inherent in publishing has grown in past decades because of increasing globalization. Translations make up a growing share of all published books, especially in smaller language areas (Heilbron, 2008). As a result, editors are increasingly concerned with the acquisition of translation rights—the right to publish a book in a particular language area. Thus, they have to make their selection not only from all unpublished manuscripts in their own language, they also have to consider the entirety of global book production when selecting. This global production has been growing steadily every year.¹ This means there is more diversity in books available—making it even harder to establish beforehand their quality and potential audience appeal as a translation in a given nation’s “literary field.” Meanwhile, national literary fields have become more competitive due to the increasing commercialization of the publishing business (Schiffrin, 2001; Verboord, 2011). Simultaneously, competition in the “transnational” literary field has increased as editors from smaller countries—upon entering this field—have been swept along in the fast pace and strong competition that is characteristic of global centers of book production (e.g., New York, Paris), wherein promising books are often sold before they are written (Thompson, 2010).

This article analyzes the decision-making processes of editors operating in the transnational literary field. Drawing on a quantitative analysis of the structure of the Dutch literary field and interviews with editors working in the Netherlands—a small but highly internationalized literary field—we investigate how editors decide which books to buy in the global market for translations. After locating these editors and their respective publishers in the Dutch literary field, we ask the following questions: How do they find interesting new books? What criteria do they use to judge a book? How is this acquisition process organized? How do they cope with the uncertainties that are inherent to the field?

Using a “production of culture” approach that combines insights from Bourdieusian field theory with neo-institutional theory in sociology, this article traces all stages of the decision-making process—from the moment editors first hear about a manuscript to the final verdict in the publishers’ editorial meeting and the actual acquisition of a given book for translation. For all these stages, we analyze the practices by which editors attempt to cope with the problems of abundance, uncertainty and competition. In different stages, they may well cope with these problems in different ways. Furthermore, we argue that the acquisition of translation rights is best understood as a decision-making *process*—one not involving a single “gatekeeper” but rather a “gatekeeping network” in which power is distributed across a range of actors. The multiple actors involved in this process operate in different locations on the globe. They all mark, sort, classify and modify information about new books, and then they pass it on to the next actor in line. Acquisition editors are central nodes in this network. However, editors are never solely responsible for publishing decisions, and they routinely rely on information received from others.

2. Decision-making and cultural production in the transnational field

Acquisition editors, like other gatekeepers in the cultural industries, occupy a “boundary spanning” position (Hirsch, 1972). They mediate between producers, such their as their own

¹ Figures from the US (Bowker, 2011) and the UK (Nielsen Book, 2010)—as well as our Dutch data—show a continuous rise in book publications. Most likely, book production is also rising in the developing economies of Asia and Latin America.

publishing firms, and consumers in the “outside world.” Moreover, within their respective firms, they bridge the boundary between creative and managerial branches (Negus, 2002). However, editors buying translations rights also straddle a different boundary—that between the national and transnational literary fields. Their work, therefore, is embedded within their publishing house, the national literary field, and a transnational network of publishers, scouts, agents and translators.

The notion of gatekeeping in cultural fields derives from the production of culture approach—which has applied insights from economic and organizational sociology to the production of such cultural products as books, films, and music (Coser, 1975; Hirsch, 1972; Peterson and Anand, 2004). To explain gatekeeping as process, we draw on insights from two theoretical perspectives that are commonly employed in production of culture studies—neo-institutional theory and Bourdieusian field theory.

While these theoretical perspectives originated on two different continents, they share many important assumptions, especially their epistemological aversion to determinism and their focus on a relational approach (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). The perspectives grew closer when neo-institutionalists became more interested in heterogeneity and power in cultural fields (DiMaggio, 1991; Dobbin, 2008; Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006). In both perspectives, actors and their practices are seen as embedded in and constrained by the (organizational) *field*—a particular domain of social life (e.g., book publishing). The logic(s) of the field—and the specific positions that actors have within it—constrains and guides their thoughts and practices. Neo-institutionalists see actors’ *worldview* as the mediator between field and practice, while in field theory the mediating mechanism between field structure and actors’ actions is the *habitus*, a disposition of sorts (Dobbin, 2008).

What these perspectives also have in common is that cultural production can be studied through the lens of organizational practices in the cultural field. Organizations in cultural fields—as well as in other types of fields—are held together by conventions, routines and procedures (Dobbin and Dowd, 2000; Leblebici et al., 1991). Organizational practices emerge in response to specific challenges. In turn, these practices—such as the networked structure of the gatekeeping process under scrutiny here—shape various organizational outcomes, such as the number and types of book published.

In many production of culture studies, especially those employing a neo-institutional perspective, uncertainty emerges as the central problem (cf. Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Godart and Mears, 2009; Peterson, 1997a,b). The value or quality of cultural products (e.g., books) is hard to gauge or foretell, because the objects have to be “produced” or created in a collective process that unfolds well before the final audience encounters such products (Becker, 1984). Hence, specialized professionals—gatekeepers—are needed to help establish a cultural product’s worth and potential (cf. Glynn and Lounsbury, 2005; Janssen, 1997). Individual and organizational practices in a cultural field, then, are primarily understood as responses to this value-uncertainty.

Demystifying elusive notions like quality, taste or expertise, sociologists of culture look for legitimation processes in which judgments of taste, quality and expertise are stabilized and validated (Baumann, 2007; Johnson et al., 2006). Such processes are inherently social. As Bielby and Bielby (1994) argue in their analysis of television production, decision-making in cultural production is predominantly rhetorical: convincing others of the value of a television show actually produces this value itself (cf. Thompson, 2010 on “big books”).

An important strategy for reducing uncertainty, neo-institutionalists argue, is the imitation of organizational practices and routines. Actors in the same organizational field look to others for confirmation and inspiration. Successful strategies are often copied, leading to increasing

“institutional isomorphism” within given cultural fields (Ahlkvist and Faulkner, 2002; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

In Bourdieusian field theory, competition—both over publics and over legitimacy—emerges as the central problem of cultural production. Rather than adaptation and uncertainty, conflict becomes the central structuring mechanism of cultural fields. Bourdieusian fields often revolve around the polarity of culture and economy, art and commerce. Decision-making in cultural production can be guided by the “highbrow” cultural logic (e.g., art for art’s sake) of the “field of restricted production” or the “popular” commercial logic (e.g., the financial bottom-line) of the “field of large-scale cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1996, 2008; Sapiro, 2010).

Organizations, people and products each occupy a position in this cultural field, one determined by the amount and nature—symbolic (cultural) and/or economic—of their respective capital. Each position comes with aesthetic dispositions embodied in the habitus. The most criticized element in Bourdieu’s theory is the assumption that all actors are locked in a “classification struggle,” striving to dominate the field (Becker and Pessin, 2006). For field theorists, mimicry reflects “upward aspiration”—attempts to get ahead in the field. Informed by the habitus and cultural capital, aesthetic decisions are expected to occur rather spontaneously, informed by the “magic of the field” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 134) that erases uncertainties.

The utility of combining both neo-institutional and field theories becomes apparent in light of a challenge listed above—the overabundance of new manuscripts available from the 1980s onward. This challenge is clearly vexing our informants, because it intensifies both uncertainty and competition. With more and more diverse offerings, value becomes ever harder to establish—heightening the uncertainty that neo-institutionalists emphasize. Meanwhile, within the emerging global literary field (Casanova, 2004), competition becomes ever fiercer. For instance, Heilbron and Sapiro (2007) argue that the global translation system is shaped by increasing global competition—the very competitive struggle emphasized by field theorists. This leads to the growing power of, mostly, American (popular) fiction and the pushing of Anglo-American fare into national markets, as well as to the increasing dominance of the commercial logic in national literary fields.

Like many production of culture studies, our analysis of the editorial decision-making process combines insights from neo-institutional and field theories (cf. Godart and Mears, 2009; Kremp, 2010; Peterson and Anand, 2004). Some aspects of the gatekeeping process may be better understood through neo-institutional insights—such as the development of routines and institutional innovations to control uncertainty—while others are better understood in terms of Bourdieusian power dynamics. As we unravel the entire gatekeeping process, we show that the practices of cultural professionals are guided by different logics in different stages of the decision-making process.

3. Case, data and methods

This article analyzes the acquisition process of translation rights for adult fiction in the Dutch literary field. Our analysis is based on quantitative data regarding Dutch adult fiction and poetry production in 2007 and on interviews with 24 Dutch editors.

The Dutch literary field is a useful case by which to study national and transnational literary fields. First, it is highly internationalized: nearly 30% of all books published in the Netherlands are translations. In fiction, translations even surpass original Dutch books (Heilbron, 2008). By contrast, in the UK and the US, only 4% of books are translations; in Germany and France, the share of translations is between 14% and 18% (Heilbron and Sapiro, 2007). Second, because of

its small size, our study covers virtually the entire Dutch literary field. Our dataset and interviewees encompass nearly all fictional books, except those aimed at children and at specialized readership (see below). By focusing on the remaining broad category of “adult fiction,” we capture both “popular” and “high” culture. Finally, the Netherlands provides a useful case because it has extensive and reliable data on annual book production—registering all publications in the Netherlands.² These data are much superior to the *UNESCO Index Translationum*, a source which is notoriously unreliable (Poupaud et al., 2009) and which lacks data on total book production. Indeed, our data allow us to map the structure of the Dutch literary field and to gauge the importance of translation from different languages.

3.1. The Dutch literary field: data and analysis

To get at the structure of this field—and thereby the positioning of publishing firms and acquisition editors within it—we used data from the *Nederlandse Bibliografie Online*³ of the Dutch Royal Library to construct a dataset of fiction books published in 2007 in the Netherlands. From this catalogue, we selected all books in the following categories assigned by the Royal Library: “novels and novella—originally Dutch,” “novels and novella—translated,” “poetry—originally Dutch,” and “poetry—translated.”

From this first selection, we then removed all books published by organizations or individuals that did not present themselves as a publisher/publishing company—for instance, self-published novels or books published by a company to celebrate its anniversary. For the analysis presented in this article, we also removed books by publishers of religious fiction and publishers of romance novels, as they have their own channels of acquisition and distribution separate from the general book market. In the Netherlands, romance novels are sold through the same channels as magazines, whereas Christian fiction for the most part has its own distribution system of Christian bookstores (and churches).

Our dataset has books published by 208 publishers that released one or more books in 2007. Of the 2574 books in this dataset, 58.35% are published by houses that are part of larger, mostly national, conglomerates. In our quantitative analysis, we use the 27 most prominent publishers (see Table 1). Together, they published 74% of the total amount of adult fiction in the Netherlands in 2007.

The Royal Library records various characteristics of each book in its database. For the present analysis, we used three of these variables: Dutch publisher, source language and genre. The Dutch publishers variable is recorded correctly, as publishers are normally the ones sending the book to the Royal Library. There is a major incentive to do so: all new titles are published in *Boekblad*, a Dutch industry magazine comparable to *Publishers’ Weekly*. The second variable, source language, is also very reliable in terms of its reporting.

However, the genre variable proved to be more problematic. The Royal Library uses two genre classifications. The NUR (Dutch Uniform Genre-division) code is assigned by publishers to give booksellers an idea of where to place the book in the shop. The second category—simply called “genre”—is assigned by an organization called *NBD Biblion* and is intended for libraries. However, not all books are coded in either of these systems. Of the 1903 books used in the present

² A 1993 study finds that 96.6% of books with ISBN-registration are in this database. The remaining 3.4% are argued to be mostly publications of private parties, NGOs or governmental organizations (Voorbij and Douma, 1996).

³ See <http://www.kb.nl/nederlandsebibliografie>.

Table 1
 Characteristics of publishers in the Dutch literary field.

Publisher	English	Dutch	Other	Thrillers	Poetry	Total	Economic	Symbolic	Year	Company	Scout	Cluster	Interviewed
Ambo Anthos	57.14	20.54	22.32	32.14	2.68	112	15.41	1.33	1970	NDC/VBK	Yes	2	Yes
Amstel	32.00	39.00	29.00	7.00	5.00	100	1.68	2.67	1887	NDC/VBK	Yes	1 and 3	Yes
Bruna	65.81	5.98	28.21	76.92	0.00	117	8.42	1.33	1868	PCM	Yes	2	Yes
Contact	33.33	60.00	6.67	2.22	11.11	45	2.45	2.67	1933	NDC/VBK	Yes	1	Yes
Cossee	11.11	61.11	27.78	5.56	11.11	18	0.78	5.33	2001	Independent	No	1	No
De Arbeiderspers	25.49	46.08	28.43	10.78	13.73	102	6.08	14.67	1929	WPG	Yes	1	Yes
De Bezige By	44.75	39.23	16.02	24.31	6.63	181	16.19	14.67	1944	WPG	Yes	1 and 2	Yes
De Boekery	90.31	3.57	6.12	22.45	0.00	196	2.81	0.00	1945	PCM	Yes	2	Yes
De Fontein	82.14	10.71	7.14	58.93	0.00	56	3.97	0.00	1946	NDC/VBK	Yes	2	Yes
De Geus	17.97	17.19	64.84	28.13	5.47	128	3.61	12.00	1983	Independent	No	3	Yes
De Harmonie	66.67	33.33	0.00	16.67	16.67	6	6.70	0.00	1972	Independent	No	1 and 2	Yes
De Rode Kamer	0.00	0.00	100.00	83.33	0.00	5	0.00	2.67	2005	Independent	No	3	No
Dutch Media	16.67	50.00	33.33	16.67	0.00	6	0.00	1.33	2005	Independent	No	1 and 3	No
FMB	61.90	33.33	4.76	19.05	4.76	21	0.87	1.33	2005	FMG	Yes	1 and 2	Yes
Karakter	34.38	31.25	34.38	93.75	0.00	32	1.14	1.33	2001	Independent	No	2 and 3	No
LuitinghSythoff	90.53	4.53	4.94	54.73	0.41	243	11.46	4.00	1851	NDC/VBK	Yes	2	Yes
Meulenhoff	26.73	22.77	50.50	0.99	9.90	101	1.93	1.33	1895	PCM	Yes	1 and 3	Yes
Muntinga	44.90	34.69	20.41	14.29	10.20	49	0.23	0.00	1983	Independent	Yes	1 and 2	Yes
NieuwAmsterdam	19.44	77.78	2.78	2.78	22.22	36	0.31	2.67	2005	Independent	Yes	1	Yes
Nijgh & Van Ditmar	8.33	83.33	8.33	0.00	29.17	24	2.43	5.33	1870	WPG	No	1	No
Podium	21.43	60.71	17.86	0.00	21.43	28	5.15	4.00	1997	Independent	No	1	No
Prometheus Bert Bakker	20.97	62.90	16.13	16.13	11.29	62	1.69	6.67	1989	Independent	Yes	1	Yes
Querido	15.19	58.23	26.58	7.59	16.46	79	1.67	12.00	1915	WPG	Yes	1	Yes
The House of Books	81.94	12.50	5.56	37.50	2.78	72	1.98	0.00	1999	Bertelsman	Yes	2	Yes
Unieboek	93.33	4.44	2.22	37.78	0.00	45	1.29	0.00	1878	PCM	Yes	2	Yes
Van Oorschot	10.53	63.16	26.32	0.00	31.58	19	0.00	1.33	1945	Independent	No	1	No
Wereldbibliotheek	10.00	20.00	70.00	0.00	10.00	20	1.78	1.33	1905	Independent	No	3	No
Total						1903							
Total for the field						2574							

analysis, 1548 have one or more NUR-codes, and 1378 have one or more NBD-codes. Moreover, there is a strong bias as to which books get a NUR and/or NBD-code. We have solved this problem by combining the two codes. This resulted in 1788 books with at least one code, which only leaves 115 missing values. This results in a simple genre classification in our dataset: poetry, thriller, and other.

All books with a NUR-code or NBD-code of “poetry” are classified as poetry in our dataset. Poetry then becomes a proxy for “high culture,” as it is generally combined with high literary work in a publisher’s catalogue. The second category is “thriller.” For this category, we have combined the NUR code “thriller” and “literary thriller” with the NBD-codes of “thriller,” “detective,” “horror,” and “espionage.” This category generally denotes publishers with popular genres. Sadly, we could not make additional categories for different types of fiction—such as literature, women’s fiction, historical novels or “chick lit”—as there only is a general NUR-code for literary works, which is used for all types of novels (hence our final category of “other”).

With the data in hand, we then analyzed the structure of the literary field using principal component analysis (PCA) in Stata version 12. This method is widely used in social sciences to “reduce the dimensionality of a data set. . . while retaining as much as possible of the variation present in the data set” (Jolliffe, 2002, p. ix). This is done by creating principal components—which are uncorrelated variables that, taken together, contain as much of the variance of the original variables as possible (Jolliffe, 2002).

In the analysis, we included source language (Dutch/English/other) and the genre codes described above, as well as measures for economic and symbolic capital (as accumulated between 2003 and 2007). To measure economic capital, we first used yearly Top 100 lists made by the CPNB,⁴ calculating for each publisher the percentage of titles on this list in each year. From the same Top 100, we used sales figures—given specifically for the Top 3 and given ranges (e.g., between 20,000 and 25,000) for the lower positions. We took the lowest number given and, again, calculated each publisher’s share in the total sales for each year. These two items together form our scale for economic capital, with a Cronbach’s α of .94.

To measure symbolic capital, we counted the literary prizes—both nationally and internationally—that a given publisher received between 2003 and 2007.⁵ We calculated each publisher’s share of the total number of prizes. This scale is based on 22 items, with a Cronbach’s α of .76.

3.2. *The gatekeeping process: data and analysis*

To get at the gatekeeping process qualitatively, we approached 28 acquisition editors, selecting those at all the major Dutch publishing houses with a moderate or strong focus on translations. Twenty-four consented to an interview. We sometimes conducted multiple interviews at (different imprints of) one company. Interviews ranged in time from half an hour to

⁴ See <http://web.cpnb.nl/cpnb/campagne.vm?c=51>.

⁵ We selected the following prizes given for specific book titles (no oeuvre awards): Academica Debutantenprijs, AKO literatuurprijs, Anton Wachterprijs, Augustprijs, C. Buddinghprijs, Costa Book Awards, De Gouden Uil, De Diamanten kogel, De Gouden Strop, Ida Gerhardt Poëzieprijs, IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, Grand Prix du roman de l’académie Française, Nordic Council Literature Prize, Man Booker Prize, NBCCA Fiction, NBCCA Poetry, NS Publieksprijs, PEN/Faulkner Award, Premio Strega, Le prix Goncourt, Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and the VSB Poëzieprijs.

one and a half hours, with a typical interview being one hour. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software and a theoretically informed coding scheme addressing such concepts as uncertainty, imitation, and competition. Respondents typically had a university-level humanities degree and were relatively young and female (19 female and 5 male editors, most between 27 and 40). This age and gender bias suggests that acquisitions editorship is a beginner's job or a less prestigious one. In the interviews, we discussed personal characteristics of the editors (e.g., education), the publishing house at which they work, the selection process, the books and their public. We specifically discussed debut authors, because the acquisition of debuts is a risky investment that requires thorough justification—whereas the rights for books by established authors are often bought without editors reading the book. All quotes have been anonymized at our informants' request.

4. The Dutch literary field: structure and translations

Before analyzing the editorial decision-making process, we briefly analyze the field in which contemporary Dutch editors make their decisions. We selected the most prominent Dutch publishing companies—on the basis of their accumulation of economic (e.g., bestseller lists) or symbolic (e.g., prizes) capital in the period from 2003 till 2007. This led to an analysis with 27 publishing houses. Table 1 lists those houses and details a range of information—such as their respective amounts of symbolic and economic capital.

To understand the structure of the Dutch literary field, including the role of translations, we did a principal component analysis that involves measures for symbolic and economic capital, prominence of genres (thriller, poetry, other) and source language. Table 2 shows the results of the PCA of these variables (with publishing houses as units of analysis). Three components describe the structure of the literary field, with a total explained variance of 86%. The first component distinguishes publishers who mainly publish in Dutch from those publishing mainly translations from English and distinguishes thriller-dominated publishers from publishers strong in poetry. The second component differentiates publishers of Dutch and English books (of any genre) from publishers in other languages. The third component represents total capital volume—indicating considerable overlap between symbolic and economic capital. Indeed, 19 publishers have high volumes of both economic and symbolic capital. This suggests that, in the

Table 2
Results of principal component analysis.

Principal components	Eigen value			Explained variance
Component 1	3.07071			0.4387
Component 2	1.61924			0.67
Component 3	1.3166			0.8581

Variable	Comp1	Comp2	Comp3	Unexplained
Economic capital	−0.1922	−0.2621	0.687	0.154
Symbolic capital	0.2198	0.114	0.7185	0.151
English	−0.4443	−0.4648	−0.0488	0.04075
Dutch	0.5203	−0.178	−0.0096	0.1171
Other	0.0105	0.7607	0.0705	0.0561
Thrillers	−0.4435	0.2471	0.0539	0.2934
Poetry	0.4998	−0.1755	−0.0388	0.1811

highest strata of the literary field, symbolic and economic capital reinforce each other. Bourdieu (2008) reported similar findings for publishers in the late-twentieth century French literary field, as did Anheier et al. (1995) in their analysis of the literary field of Cologne, Germany.

On the basis of this analysis, we distinguish three groups of publishers—characterized by specific profiles of source language, genre and capital. The Prestigious-Local Cluster consists of publishers with more symbolic than economic capital and that publish Dutch (literary) fiction along with some highly prestigious foreign authors (Nabokov, Mann). The Anglo-American-Genre Cluster specializes in “genre” fiction (e.g., thrillers, sci-fi, chick lit) translated from English. These publishers have, on average, more economic than symbolic capital. The Dutch books they publish are usually in the popular genres. Finally, in the Exotic-Languages Cluster, we find publishers of translations from languages other than Dutch and English: This cluster contains publishers with literary and thriller-based lists, as well as combinations of those. As Table 1 shows, 18 publishers fit into one group, but some publishers combine strategies. Oftentimes, publishers have different imprints for different clusters. *De Bezige Bij*, the Netherlands’ most important publisher—scoring highest on economic and symbolic capital—publishes Dutch and prestigious international literary authors under its own name, while its less prestigious genre fiction is “locked away” in an imprint called *Cargo*. Separately, *Cargo* and the main catalogue fall neatly into Anglo-American-Genre and Prestigious-Local Clusters, respectively.⁶

Hence, in the Dutch literary field, the highbrow–lowbrow division intersects with a division between locally and transnationally oriented publishers. The third cluster presents an interesting and additional division within the field—the “standard” languages of Dutch and English versus all others. In his last publication on the French literary field, Bourdieu (2008) reported that the publication of translations from “peripheral” languages was a relatively new strategy—one typical of newcomers in more autonomous or avant-garde corners of the literary field, and who were often also physically located in more “peripheral” areas. However, in the Dutch field, publication of translations has been more established and, therefore, has developed further. It is used by both literary and commercial houses, some of which are relatively old and have published out of “peripheral” languages for a long time (De Glas, 2012). This difference between the two national fields is most likely related to the small size and traditionally international orientation of the Dutch field (see Janssen et al., 2008).

5. Editors and the acquisition process: decision-making in context

Editors are the main gatekeepers in the acquisition process and the only ones involved in all stages of the decision-making. Their boundary-spanning function—between managerial and creative branches in their publishing house, and between the house and transnational field—gives them a great deal of autonomy (Greco, 2005).

In this section, we analyze all stages of the acquisition of book translation rights based on editors’ accounts of this process, and the strategies and resources they use in each stage. We find that this process is structured similarly for different types of publishing houses. Hence, irrespective of field position, editors encounter the same problems in each stage of the decision-making process—although they may differ in the types and extent of resources at their disposal and the gravity of each problem for their specific situation. Thus, we explain how editors decide,

⁶ For additional information on the clusters (e.g., the situation of imprints), see Appendix A in the online supplement.

and how their decisions are shaped by their position—in the company, and in the Dutch and transnational literary fields.

5.1. Selection in a world of plenty

The first problem editors face is an oversupply of manuscripts. There is no time to read even a fraction of all the manuscripts available on the global market. Editors try to control the amount of information by decentralizing decision-making. That is, they rely on others in this first stage of information gathering. There are three types of people to which editors outsource their work—agents, friends within the industry (e.g., foreign editors, translators, literary critics), and scouts.

Literary agents represent authors or publishers and, in the process, help editors navigate the abundance of possibilities. Editors contact agents to get manuscripts they have heard about from scouts or friends in the industry, and they place their bids for translation rights with the agent. Literary agents also actively promote books to foreign publishers. In the Anglo-American market, for instance, publishing deals are rarely made without a literary agent acting as a middleman (Childress, 2011).

Friends in the field also play crucial roles in editorial outsourcing. Coser et al. (1982) reported the importance of informal networks in their classic analysis of the American publishing field. However, we find that, for our informants, friends *outside* the Dutch literary field are especially important—such as editors working in other national fields.

At a certain moment, you see you have bought a couple of books and you have the same taste as another editor [in another country]. And for me, that's almost more important than the scout—well, the scout is very important too, but I really focus on books that others acquire, [those] I know well and I know to have the same taste. (Anglo-American-Genre Cluster)⁷

If you have been around for a while, you see a couple of people whose taste is a little like yours. Where you think: When they buy something, there is a reasonable chance that I will like it too. (Anglo-American-Genre)

Editors working at foreign companies pass on manuscripts they have received, thus giving some Dutch editors a head start in securing translation rights. Also, translators in foreign literary fields inform Dutch editors about the publication of a promising new book; this is especially important for languages that editors cannot read or languages for which they have no scouts. Editors in the Exotic-Languages Cluster rely almost exclusively on such informal connections.

For Dutch editors buying translation rights, literary scouts—located in the centers of the global literary field—are an important, if not the main, source for new manuscripts and information. Scouts are particularly important for publishers orientated towards the high-powered Anglo-American literary field. All publishers in the Anglo-American-Genre Cluster—except for 2 of the small mixed-strategy ones—have scouts in New York, but only 5 out of 9 in the Local-Prestigious Cluster do (see Table 1). Publishing houses in the Exotic-Languages Cluster rarely have scouts in New York, but they sometimes have scouts in Paris or Barcelona.

Scouts send daily or weekly reports listing all rights that are “on the market,” with comments on books of interest for a publishing house. The scouts' main task is to be informed about the

⁷ We present anonymous quotes with the cluster(s) in which the editor's publishing house is located.

literary field that they cover, mostly through maintaining a network of editors and agents. Their comments can range from a single exclamation point to a lengthy discussion. One editor notes,

And this scout, he's in New York, and the only thing he does all day is talking on the phone to the editors there and having lunch with editors and keeping up with the latest all over the place. He's an octopus sort of person [laughs], and we have a really good one, and he knows everything. He doesn't just know everything, he also knows exactly what we are looking for. He really understands our house, and he makes a really big pre-selection, which is very pleasant. (Prestigious-Local)

Scouts work for publishers in different countries. As they are expensive, Dutch houses often “share” a scout within their conglomerate, as well as outside of the parent company. This works well for publishers in different clusters, like *Prometheus* and *Unieboek* who shared a scout in New York. However, *De Boekerij* and *Bruna*, both in the Anglo-American-Genre Cluster shared a scout in London, which can cause tension given their similar position in the field.

Dutch editors use their networks of agents, friends and scouts to deal with the problem of abundance. First, relying on their networks calls attention to the most important manuscripts (although too much reading still remains). Second, international connections help them “beat” their Dutch competitors. Most importantly, editors use their international connections to sift and classify books for them. They rely on the expertise and taste of these people when thinking about which books “fit” their catalogue and, hence, which books to buy.

Some people who have known the house for a long time, I sense that in the way they send me information. They don't just send me everything they have. They only send me the books they know will have a chance. So I know if this particular person emails me, then I have to look at it immediately. (Exotic-Languages)

As this quote illustrates, editorial concerns about quality not only involve “what is good,” but also, more specifically, “what is good *for us*.” Thus, having a network of people who know each other's tastes—and who share a trust—is crucial for editors when coping simultaneously with uncertainty, abundance and competition (see Foster et al., 2011; Kawashima, 1999; Powell, 1978).

The networks of Dutch editors are not static and unchanging. The increasing professionalization of networks—particularly in dealing with the Anglo-American literary field—not only affects the decision-making process of Dutch editors, but also the Dutch literary field. Dutch editors started hiring scouts because, without them, it was almost impossible to keep up with Anglo-American book production. Nowadays, a scout is essential for publishers focusing on English translations, as the Anglo-American market is bigger and faster than ever:

That [market] is different because just the bulk of what everyone is doing is English-language, so everyone is on top of it. So you don't have time to wait till something has proven itself. There is also more coming out, so you have less of an overview. (Anglo-American-Genre)

While in other fields, one can wait and see whether something hits the bestseller list, in the Anglo-American field, one is always in a hurry.

This increasing reliance on scouts has resulted in a self-reinforcing process of dependence on translations from English. A scout in London or New York leads to more information on Anglo-American manuscripts, leaving less time to look into other markets. Moreover, the considerable expense of maintaining a scout must be legitimized by acquiring Anglo-American books. That, in turn, increases contact with Anglo-American agents and editors, resulting in even more usable

information and a further specialization. Indeed, the percentage of English books published in the Netherlands is rising steadily (Heilbron, 2008).

The organizational innovation of hiring scouts—intended to tackle uncertainty, abundance and competition in the Dutch literary field—has directly affected literary output, leading to an increasing orientation towards the global centers, especially New York. Moreover, editors' increasing focus on the Anglo-American market has sparked competition between Dutch publishers. These findings, then, underline the impact of innovative institutional practices on organizational outcomes (see Coser et al., 1982; Dobbin and Dowd, 2000). Moreover, they highlight how reorientation in national fields towards the global centers—while reflecting the power structure of the cultural world system (Heilbron and Sapiro, 2007; cf. Janssen et al., 2008)—is mediated by meso-level arrangements among the fields organizations.

5.2. Positioning a manuscript

The editors now have a manageable amount of information that is sorted, classified and annotated by people in their respective networks. They can then assess the quality and importance of this information—gauging so on the basis of their trust in the competence of particular agents, friends and scouts. Following that, the time has come for editors to decide which manuscripts to read. Although the problem of abundance is partly solved, uncertainty remains about both the quality of manuscripts and their chance of success in the Dutch market. Now that the least attractive books are filtered out, competition may become even more intense for the books that remain. Yet, at this stage, it is still not feasible to read every manuscript of interest, even the first ten pages. So another filter is needed.

In this stage, editors try to make sense of the manuscript by positioning it in the literary field. They do this on the basis of their *own* knowledge of the transnational field. They look at the book's genre, author and storyline, as well as the agent or publisher selling the rights. All these pieces of information help them evaluate a given manuscript. This is also why information from their networks is crucial: it gives additional clues for understanding the nature of the book. The better editors can assess these things, the less likely they are to miss an important manuscript.

This process of deciding what to read also requires a thorough understanding of the history and the structure of the multiple fields in which the editors are active—the Dutch literary field, the field in which the book was originally published, and other national fields. Indeed, editors use information on interest from other language areas to situate the translation rights of a book:

[W]hen it says who the foreign publisher is. What other publishers are interested and which books have appeared there already. That gives you an impression straight away. (Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Language Mixture)

A way to gauge this is to how many countries it has been sold already and to what publishers in these countries. For us, *BlanValet* [a publisher] in Germany is important; we are often on the same page with them. (Anglo-American-Genre)

I notice I am getting more critical. Especially when I just started, I didn't know all these foreign publishers at the time, I would hear it was sold to all those countries, and I would think, "Oh, that's interesting," bells start ringing in my head. And then my colleague would say, "Yes, but look at the publishers it has been sold to." (Prestigious-Local)

It takes some time to learn to use such contextual information effectively and without mistakes. Moreover, this is learned by doing—by reading a lot, by studying the positions of publishing houses, by talking with colleagues, and by visiting international book fairs to create one’s own network. As a young editor told us:

Yes, that is clearly something I need to build up because, of course, I haven’t been in the business very long. And these connections you really make at these fairs. In Frankfurt and in London. And these are the contacts you really have to maintain and expand. But I am still very much at the beginner’s stage. But after those fairs, because of the meetings you’ve had, people always send you a lot of materials. And if all goes well, after a while, you become part of this system, and they send you stuff throughout the year. (Anglo-American-Genre)

As this quote illustrates, this learning process involves *both* cultural and social capital. This combination of accumulating specialized and validated knowledge (cultural capital) and creating a network of helpful connections (social capital) eventually gives acquisition editors the expertise to place successfully a manuscript—which, in turn, may help them “beat” the local competition and, very importantly, may prevent them from wasting time on unimportant manuscripts that do not fit their catalogues.

5.3. *The work of expertise*

When editors have decided which manuscripts might be interesting, they then start reading. At this stage, they have rejected or ignored completely most of the potential books on the market—so the problem of excess supply is now under control. Only at this stage of the process, then, do textual characteristics of the books finally come into play. Consequently, this is the moment that editors have to decide about (aesthetic) quality—the most uncertain and contested aspect of cultural production. Unsurprisingly, this is the stage that editors find hardest to explain.

We asked editors about what criteria they use to judge manuscripts and how they decide which manuscripts to buy for their publishing house. In general, Dutch editors are confident about their expertise to buy the “right” books, but they are reluctant to specify their evaluative criteria. Explicit criteria, they assert, come into play in the *next* stage of the decision-making process, when others have to be convinced about a book. In this stage of reading, however, the most important thing is that editors themselves feel a “connection” with a book. This connection can either be a matter of personal taste—which they find more relevant for literature (high culture) than for genre fiction (popular culture)—or it can be a conviction that “other people” will like a book, which is a more distant connection than is personal taste. In both cases, the connection is described in intuitive and emotional terms: a “click” often mentioned as the result of *Fingerspitzengefühl*. This German word, widely used in Dutch, denotes feeling in, or with, the tips of one’s fingers. The best English translation is “gut feeling”—which points to a similar intuitive assessment, but is located in quite a different body part.

Yes, you have to have a click with it. But what specific element causes that? . . . That could be anything. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

That is really that *Fingerspitzengefühl* that he [an older co-worker] has, and I hope to get that too. (Prestigious-Local)

I pick up a book and then I think, “Yes, I connect with this emotionally,” and then I start reading. . . Those are the books you end up buying. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

Editors thus “feel” that a book is good, that it fits them, and that it should be published by their house. What they describe here is what Bourdieu (1990, p. 66) called the “feel for the game.”

This feel for the game is learned by doing, rather like getting to know the structure of literary fields described above. In judging a book, editors primarily draw on embodied reading experiences. All editors reported having had long histories of intensive childhood reading. Moreover, most of them (80%) have earned a literature degree, which trained them in exactly these skills. They have been further socialized by their peers at the publishing house into the rules of specific genres by reading and discussing books. Through these accumulated reading experiences, they have acquired knowledge and develop their literary taste. Moreover, editors read constantly (mostly bad manuscripts) as part of their work. Even during their holidays, editors continue reading for personal enjoyment, often books from other publishers. All these reading experiences are internalized and employed in the decision-making process.

Interviewer: How do you know whether something, in its genre, is a good book?

Editor: Well you never know for sure. It’s a matter of having read a lot. Developing your frame of reference, having read that genre. In essence, it’s not much different from a soccer scout standing at the soccer field. Why? Because he has seen tens of thousands of little boys play soccer. (Anglo-American-Genre)

This description supports the Bourdieusian understanding of taste as embodied and as learned by doing and training. In this way, the logics of the field (e.g., those of art and commerce) are gradually inscribed in actors’ practices regarding new manuscripts.

Despite their reluctance to specify criteria of evaluation, our interviewees draw on distinct aesthetic repertoires to assess a book’s quality. These aesthetic repertoires reproduce the highbrow–lowbrow division in the field, but with some interesting modifications. Two opposing repertoires on which they draw correspond to genres: literary fiction versus popular genre fiction. The literary aesthetic is exemplified by this editor who acquires literary books at an Anglo-American-Genre house:

You are looking for a sensation of being moved without collapsing into sentimentality. And that you call “quality” and “authentic” and “original” and “craftsmanship.”

Editors from Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Clusters commonly refer to this literary aesthetic—which revolves around style, tone of voice and language, as well as originality and well-controlled emotionality (i.e., the traditional literary aesthetic). Aesthetic norms for genre fiction, in contrast, resemble popular aesthetic repertoires similar to those used in cultural fields like television (Bielby, 2011) and pop music (Van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010). This repertoire revolves around emotional engagement and identification. Tension and plot need to be good, and characters need to evolve. Chick lit needs to be romantic, thrillers need to be thrilling.

Beside these two aesthetics repertoires, we find another set of opposing repertoires: conservation versus innovation (Bayma, 1995; Bourdieu, 1984). In the conservation repertoire, an object is judged on the basis of an ideal version (Paulsen and Staggs, 2005). This repertoire leads editors to search for superior examples of what is already there and to strike a good balance between innovation and recognition:

You do want to book to be unique in this sense, otherwise there is no use in publishing it if it is a copy of another book. But you do have to be able to place it alongside something for people—otherwise they will not know what to refer to. (Anglo-American-Genre)

It must be surprising, then again it must also be recognizable. (Anglo-American-Genre)

The repertoire of conservation represents a specific logic attuned to financial matters—in the Bourdieusian sense—yet at the same time, it is a business strategy of risk avoidance. The conservation repertoire, then, is also a response to uncertainty that is typical of cultural production (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Godart and Mears, 2009).

In contrast, the repertoire of innovation is central to the traditional artistic ethos—looking for what is original and groundbreaking. It also appears to drive publishers in the Exotic-Languages Cluster, who look for interesting new authors from “unexplored” or “exotic” countries. However, the repertoire of innovation implies heightened risk: looking for what is truly new means accepting the possibility of failure. As there is no “ideal type” available, editors drawing on this repertoire find it hard to explain how they make decisions. Hence, editors are most likely to give intuitive and emotional descriptions of the selection process.

Through these combined and opposing aesthetic repertoires, Dutch editors reproduce a division between art and entertainment, between literary and genre fiction—even when they work for a house that publishes both. Editors buying both literature and genre fiction find it easier to judge genre fiction because of its more standardized form.

I think it also has to do with genre because I think that for thrillers, for example, it is much easier to establish criteria than for literature. Because for thrillers you can say, “It must be psychological because these are the thrillers that work well.” Do the characters develop? Because in the old mainstream thrillers characters used to be very flat. So, that is really important. Does the plot have enough suspense, is the twist believable? You know, in a thriller you just have much more rules to hold on to than in a regular literary novel. . . So I can just say, “Well, I don’t find the plot convincing, so I am putting it away. I don’t feel the characters are coming to life, so I’m putting it away.” (Anglo-American-Genre)

The standardization of genre fiction makes quality assessment easier: the editor has something to “hold on to.” Although editorial evaluation of both literature and genre fiction is based on embodied taste and knowledge of the field—editors describe this process for literature in more personal and emotional terms:

Thrillers you judge rationally. But literary work, that corresponds with your taste. With thrillers, much less so. (Anglo-American-Genre)

This division between literary and genre fiction corresponds to the way editors talk about their own taste, and signals a longer and deeper relationship with literary fiction than with genre fiction in their personal histories. They all express a personal preference for literature, although some have broader tastes that include some forms of genre fiction. Editors buying genre fiction do not see themselves as the prime audience for their acquisitions. This explains why they look for a different type of “connection” with the book.

You don’t have to love everything you publish, I think. You can very well judge a book’s merits when it’s not your personal taste. I am indeed not very fond of Chick Lit, but when I read I am perfectly capable of distinguishing a good one from a bad one. . . So especially

with literary books, my personal taste matters. If I think a literary book is no good, I probably will not buy it. (Anglo-American-Genre)

No, the good thing about [the publisher] is that sometimes it does not match my taste at all, because we have a lot of genre books. Those are more easily judged from a distance, so to say. So you don't have to think just "I find this such a beautiful book" without being able to pinpoint exactly why, except that it's beautifully written. Or what you could do with it on the market. But when I am really looking out for a book for [publisher], I ask: Does it fit in the catalogue, and where, and what should it look like, and who is the target group? And I prefer not to have all that other stuff, that I can deal with it in a more businesslike manner. (Prestigious-Local)

This distinction between thinking and feeling—distanced, rule-based judgment versus more engaged personal taste—mirrors the opposition between art and commerce central to field theoretical understandings of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). However, like other research on the dynamics of literary field in Cologne, Germany (Anheier et al., 1995) and on poetry in France and Canada (Craig and Dubois, 2010), we find that the interplay of artistic and commercial logics is more fluid and less clear-cut. While editors contrast literary and popular genres—innovation and conservation—they always draw on their own reading experiences, so as to look for general feeling of "fit" between a book and their publisher's catalogue and, thus, the book's position in the field. This experience of fit determines their judgment of quality, and it can be based on different kinds of criteria that draw on various aesthetic repertoires—which can be literary or popular, more "personal" but also commercial and strategic.

The insistence on emotional judgment does not necessarily stand in the way of the obvious commercial interests that editors also have and that drives their search for bestsellers. Despite talk of quality, "feel" and personal taste, while reading a manuscript, all editors keep in mind the book's commercial potential—even those in the Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Clusters. All editors make a so-called "calculation" as to whether the cost of the rights, translation, and production of a book all "work" regarding a predicted number of copies sold at a certain price. Of course this calculation is easily manipulated by predicting higher sales, but it goes to show that the commercial is always present.

Editors talk about this in terms of finding a balance between quality and commercial potential:

As much profit as possible with the best possible books. (Prestigious-Local)

So that I find it good is not enough, but it is a necessary condition. That is has commercial potential is not enough, but is a necessary condition. (Prestigious-Local)

Editors at publishers orientated towards literature often have a strict literary (personal) taste. But even they have to consider (relative) commercial potential:

Some books I publish. If I had a publishing house of my own I would publish them too. But a large part is just below that line. And that's just because you think, "There must be an audience for this, so there must be a fair chance to sell over a thousand." And when you think, "I find this marvelous, but it's just not going to work"—then I won't do it. (Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Mixture)

I have learnt to set aside my own taste, otherwise I'll only buy very small hard-to-sell books. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

This engagement with commerciality, however, is never absolute. As editors stress, selling books is not like “selling vacuum cleaners” (Exotic-Languages Cluster) or working in a “potato peeler factory” (Prestigious-Local Cluster). In fact, most editors sometimes buy books that they expect will *not* “break even” (i.e., not earn more than it costs). Only 4 interviewees—all from the Anglo-American-Genre Cluster—say they would never do that. Yet, 3 of these 4 also concede that they would consider publishing a second or even third novel if they “believe” in the author whose first novel did not break even. Clearly, *direct* expectation of profit is not necessary for buying a book. For editors in the Anglo-American-Genre Cluster, “image” is an important reason to buy potentially unprofitable books. Doing so sends a statement, both to the national and international fields, that their publishing house matters. Also, “building an author” is important for these editors and their houses: a profit in the long run is a reason to publish a debut novel that is not “completely there yet.”

Editors in the Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Clusters report similar considerations of image building and long-term investment. For those publishers, certain authors are “the face of the publishing house.” Again, this is a matter of national and international image and prestige—as well as of “building a catalogue.” However, these editors also presented more idealistic reasons for their choices; for instance, they thought that some books should be available in the Dutch language.

This stage of the gatekeeping process differs from earlier stages. On the one hand, the main problem for editor is uncertainty, while abundance and competition fade into the background. Abundance has by and large been solved by the filtering occurring in previous stages; however, competition’s fade in this stage is momentary, as it become important again when the bidding must be done (see Section 5.5). On the other hand, this stage of decision-making (and this stage alone) is an individualistic one for editors, rather than distributed or shared. This probably explains their strong reliance on emotional and intuitive terms in this stage. Their evaluations and choices are not simply a performance of status enhancement—be it one that is cynically strategic or one resulting from the “magic of the field.” Instead, their evaluative choices result from personal taste and *Fingerspitzengefühl*—the expertise built up from their lifelong experiences as readers and over the course of their professional careers. That said, this expertise is strongly shaped by their position in the field: All editors are trying to buy not simply what is good, but what is good *for their houses*—that fitting the niche and profile of their respective publishers.

5.4. *The legitimation of editorial choices*

The next stage of the acquisition process is the editorial board meeting. There, the editors, the publisher, and sometimes the commercial director meet to discuss what they have read during the past week. Editors present the book(s) they want to buy and attempt to convince others of its worth. In this stage, an editor’s “click” with a book has to be framed into a convincing story and thus legitimated. If editors cannot “explain” a book, they cannot expect the sales staff to be able to do so—which means that the book will not get into the bookstores and fail hopelessly in the marketplace.

Because you have to convince the company and everyone in there that it makes sense to publish something. When it is like, “I love it but I cannot convince anyone we should do it”—then you must not do it. Because if you cannot convince sales, marketing, the publisher that it makes sense to publish—well, these are the people who will have to do it, in practice. (Prestigious-Local)

Thornton (2004) describes the existence of these meetings as a shift from an editorial logic emphasizing aesthetic matters to a market logic with less editorial autonomy. While the board meeting is indeed a necessary obstacle to pass before a given book is bought, our findings suggest these meetings are mostly a matter of creating belief and enthusiasm among co-workers (cf. Thompson, 2010).

Editors use various rhetorical strategies to construct a story for the editorial meeting that legitimates their decision to publish a book. Such rhetoric is not limited to publishing. As Bielby and Bielby (1994) showed, genre, reputation and imitation are important rhetorical strategies in the cultural industries. Mauws (2000) added innovation as a fourth strategy. All these rhetorical strategies serve primarily to convince important people of a product's quality and its chances to become a success—people in charge of the business and the creative end. Hence, the main function at this stage of the process is (again) the reduction of uncertainty, this time within the publishing house.

Editors often have particular, even personal, reasons for selecting a book. In the editorial meeting, they have to rationalize and legitimate these reasons to convince the board. In contrast with the findings of Bielby and Bielby (1994) for television, we find that genre is rather unimportant, because publishing houses typically have an established interest in some genres. Reputation, imitation and innovation, however, are important arguments editors use to persuade the board. As one of the editors told us about the “trick” of imitation:

Yes, that's always the way to go, you can use it to goad them into buying a book. When you say, “This is very much like Murakami” . . . You always try to find something to sell it and that's a very good trick indeed. Bring up authors who sell well, like: “It's very much like this.” “We can present this as a kind of . . .” “For the readers of. . .” (Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Mixture)

Besides the four rhetorical strategies described above, we find a fifth one that is extremely important in the work of editors. This is the “fit” of the book with the publishers' catalogue of present and past authors and books:

Because I think she [an author] will, yes she fits with the house. So she belongs here I think. (Prestigious-Local)

Well, it fits with [the publisher]. (Anglo-American-Genre)

It is just good, it fits with [the publisher] and I expect more from it in the long run. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

I really read like, “Does it fit in the catalogue?”—and if so, on which spot? (Anglo-American-Genre)

It has to fit in your catalogue, no matter what. (Anglo-American-Genre)

I try to take into account the way our catalogue looks, with everything we already did. And then I try to read from that point of view. (Anglo-American-Genre)

This fit with the publishing house's catalogue is central to editors' attempts to “sell” their books to the board. As a rhetorical strategy, it could be dubbed “identity”: it appeals to the need for a company to present a coherent image both within the company and in the Dutch and transnational

literary fields. This “identity” logic appears typical of a field divided in smaller niches, rather than a field where everyone competes with everyone in general fashion.

Interestingly, our interviewees speak of this process to convince the board as a matter of rhetoric, in which the “tricks” of reputation, imitation, and innovation are very important. Editors regard the story they have to tell in the editorial meeting as not a fair representation of the book’s qualities. An editor explains:

You never get much further than, “I liked it and it’s well written,” and then you start telling the story and you try to convey what’s so nice about the story. But it’s true—what you find really good about it. . .there, people just have to trust your experience or something like that. (Prestigious-Local and Exotic-Languages Mixture)

This gap between the “real” evaluation and the rationalized story editors need to tell reflects both the editors’ autonomy from the managerial level, as they are the only ones who read (the entire) book, and the limits of this autonomy, as the entire board decides about the acquisition of translation rights. Hence, at this stage as well, decision-making remains distributed over many people.

5.5. *Competing with national rivals*

Finally, when the decision is made to try and buy the rights to a book, the publisher calls the rights holder to make an offer. The rights holder is often a literary agency, sometimes a publisher. When several Dutch publishers are interested in the same book, an auction is organized: publishers place bids with the rights holder until one publisher is left. Publishers can avoid going into an auction by “pre-empting” the book: they offer the rights holder a certain amount of money to “take the book off the table.”

In this stage of the acquisition process, competition comes to the fore as the main challenge. Publishers enter into what can become a ferocious bidding war. However, the competition is not only about economic capital. Of course, one needs money to get the books that are expected to become bestsellers. Publishing houses that deal in “big books” need to have a certain size and economic strength, but they also need symbolic capital to convince the rights holder. For instance, when several houses are left offering more or less the same amount of money, rights holders can ask publishers to write letters explaining why they each are the best publisher for this book. Here, symbolic capital, as visible in the publishers’ respective catalogues, becomes important:

At such a moment, so you bid the same amount for instance. At that point status comes into play. Then they often choose the one who—either the publisher knows these people, or it just has the best backlist, where the house just has very well known authors. That very much comes into play then. For instance we once lost a bid for the new [name], we were bidding against *Querido* [a publisher], but of course the author chose *Querido* because, yes that is, they have so much status, they have won so many prizes, that is. . . So then this status, it really counts. You also take that into account with books, also internationally for instance. Like: this is something that is very well known internationally and really has status. . .it’s also a great thing to have in your catalogue because people recognize it. And because of that you can get better books. And so you build up your status also internationally. (Anglo-American-Genre)

It also makes the rest of your catalogue look good. When they see abroad, they publish Nabokov, Joyce, and Bellow—then authors will also say more quickly, “I want to go there too.” (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

Especially for English-language books, competition may be intense. These quotes are in line with Bourdieusian notions of competition (Bourdieu, 1993). Moreover, they underscore recent studies stating that globalization intensifies competition both in the national field, and in the global field, especially for English-language books (Sapiro, 2010).

However, we also find that such competition in the national field is predominantly niche-based. Editors and publishers often find they have to have genre-specific capital in addition to what we could call “mainstream literary symbolic capital”:

Interviewer: Is literary status important for your fantasy and thriller imprints too? Do you need fantasy status or literary status?

Editor: In Fantasy, it’s just about Fantasy status, but with other books that also comes into play, it’s also the full picture, your image. (Anglo-American-Genre)

Hence, competition within the national field looks different, and may be more ferocious, for different types of publishers. Large publishers in the Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Clusters need to have economic as well as symbolic capital to beat their competitors, especially when competing for literary or popular fiction. However, for more specific genres such as thrillers and fantasy, the smaller niche-based publishers or imprints of larger houses encounter only niche-based competition.

The Dutch literary field, then, is built up around different subfields with publishing houses that are really only in competition with each other. Among these we find more “mainstream” niches like American or English literature for the Prestigious-Local Cluster or English-language crime or women’s fiction for the Anglo-American-Genre Cluster, alongside smaller niches like poetry, science-fiction, and all translations from languages other than English. The publishers in these niches are looking for relatively similar books, and they get by and large the same information from scouts, agents and friends. Ultimately, they end up competing for the same books. Thus, in contrast with classical Bourdieusian interpretations of the literary field, hierarchies of symbolic capital within the field at large do exist, but do not lead to much struggle or competition on a day-to-day basis. In daily editorial practice, the Dutch literary field emerges rather as a segmented field composed of many niches, with editors “fighting” within their respective subfields. As we argue below, we believe that this increasing segmentation of the field is propelled by growing globalization of the literary world.

6. The publishers’ catalogue: isomorphism and symbolic capital in the transnational field

As shown above, the coherence of their respective catalogues is crucial to editors and publishing houses. In the board meetings, the “fit” with the catalogue is an important argument because a coherent catalogue safeguards the company’s identity and image, and in auctions and biddings, it can be a determining factor for right holders’ decisions. The publisher’s catalogue—including the so-called backlist (older books still in print)—plays a central role in all phases of the acquisition process as an “objective” representation of taste and position. A coherent catalogue is necessary to create trust in the taste of an editor and to work in the field—especially given the isomorphism and symbolic capital at play in the transnational field.

6.1. Isomorphism and adaptation in the transnational field

The push towards transnational isomorphism is set in motion in the earliest stages of the acquisition process. In these first stages, acquiring editors look to colleagues in foreign companies—colleagues they believe to have the same taste in books as theirs.

At a certain moment, you see you have bought a couple of books and you have the same taste as another editor. And for me, that's more important than the scout—well, the scout is very important too, but I really focus on books that other editors acquire I know well and I know to have the same tastes. (Anglo-American-Genre)

If you have been around for a while, you see a couple of people whose taste is a little like yours. Where you think, “When they buy something, there is a reasonable chance that I like it too.” (Anglo-American-Genre)

An important site for forging connections and relationships, with foreign editors is the Frankfurt Book Fair. As one editor told us:

When I am in Frankfurt, I always pass by *Heinen* [a publisher] to take a look. Because they do a lot of titles we do too, and some titles are presented really differently. Sometimes that's because that market is different, but sometimes I go like, “Hey, we could do it like this too!” Certainly the titles that could do better than they do. Then of course, you start looking for solutions. (Anglo-American-Genre)

In fact, the Frankfurt Book Fair actively fosters international networks through their fellowship program.⁸ An interviewee participated in this program had this to say:

I was fellow at Frankfurt, Frankfurt fellowship. This is where young editors and publishers and literary agents from all around the world are selected. Sixteen each year. And with these fellows I am exchanging titles etcetera. . . Of course you see these fellows again at every fair and during Frankfurt there are special—dinners and stuff. So then you see fellows of all years but also of your own year. You know. So it's vertical and horizontal. So that is really expanding your international network, in fact. And those fellows, now I email with them saying “Hey that could be an interesting author.” This is how I look at things, how I am in touch with other editors and publishers at international publishing houses. Like, “Hey, what do you think of this? Have you read this already yes or no?” That is something, it takes quite a while to build this up. (Mixture Cluster 1 and 2)

As discussed above, editors look to colleagues in the transnational field to help cope with the abundance of manuscripts and to gauge their potential. The resulting networks that span national fields are actively fostered by institutions like book fairs and are actively sought after by acquisition editors. Resulting from the problem of uncertainty in global publishing, it leads to increasing isomorphism, creating growing homologies between national fields.

This transnational isomorphism matters in later stages of the acquisition process, as well. In the stage before the auction, the book is presented in the editorial meeting. In this meeting the editor must show that the book fits the publisher's catalogue. An important way to do this is to position the book transnationally by pointing to publishers in other countries with similar catalogues. If the “right” publishers in the US and other European countries have it, the publisher and other editors more quickly believe in the book's worth, and see that it fits in their catalogue. Thus, they feel the book *belongs* with them.

Who else have it? Well, so you look: which publishers are doing it, and do they fit with what we are doing. (Anglo-American-Genre)

⁸ See <http://www.buchmesse.de/en/academy/exchange/fellowshipprogramm/>.

What we often do is to look which publishers publish the book in foreign territories, and which American publisher it is. . . foreign publishers that publish the genre that we look for as well, then you have the same frame of reference. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

Hence, the boards of Dutch publishers look abroad for inspiration and confirmation. This process is not just about looking “up” to international centers or prestigious publishers. Rather, they are looking at similar publishers in different countries—houses that employ similar strategies, or specialize in similar genres—in order to find something that “matches” their catalogue. This leads to increasing similarity in the structure of national literary fields: publishers in different countries increasingly try to fill the same “niche,” and thus come to resemble specific publishers in other countries.

Earlier research on globalization of literature assumes that with the exchange of books, the “rules of the game” are exported from dominant transnational players to actors in the national fields (Casanova, 2004; Sapiro, 2010). However, we show a different mechanism here, leading to a more far-reaching form of isomorphism. Not only are conventions and cultural products moving from one literary field to another, the structure of the field itself—including entire catalogues and taste-repertoires—is becoming increasingly similar between nations. For each of the Dutch publishers included in this study, we can point to a “twin” in other European countries, with a similar catalogue and backlist. The networks that spur that similarity may bypass the “centers” in New York or London, focusing directly on Spain or Sweden. National fields show similarities, then, not only because of similar dominant logics, such as those stressing commercial success. There are also specific positions (i.e., specific houses with their catalogues) that are similar because the editors actively exchange information with each other and because each publisher looks to other national fields for information, inspiration, and confirmation.

6.2. *Symbolic capital in the transnational field*

Publisher catalogues involve more than isomorphism, they also provide symbolic capital in national and transnational fields. The catalogue is used as a “presentation of self” in the publishing world. When editors meet with (foreign) colleagues, both parties try to assess and classify each other. However, as we have shown above, editors find it difficult to make their criteria explicit. The solution to this problem is the catalogue. During book fairs, like the Frankfurt Book Fair, editors carry around lists of the books they publish and swap these when they meet each other. Then they talk about the lists, which gives them an understanding of each other’s taste:

In Frankfurt, for instance, we always have lunch with *Mizolli*, that’s a big Italian publishing house. And he does the translated book for their house mainly. . . and then we just go over a number of titles, like: “We read this.” “And this is what we have read.” (Anglo-American-Genre)

For instance, I met with this Scandinavian editor, and we just put our lists of acquisitions side by side, and then you see a lot of similarities. “What did you buy?” “What are you interested in?” That is the type of conversation we have. (Prestigious-Local and Anglo-American-Genre Mixture)

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu, 1984: 6). Publishers’ catalogues, as reflections of the taste of the house and its editors, reflect their position in the field. This exchange

of catalogues and potential new interests simultaneously functions as an opening for conversation, a way to position oneself and others, and as a status marker.

The catalogue allows foreign colleagues to understand a publishing house's taste and signature, so they can send the "right" manuscripts. Moreover, the catalogue, including the backlist, signals a publisher's prestige. Having specific books that are successful—symbolically or economically—show that "you know good books" and that you have been successful. This is especially important to literary agents and authors who want to sell to a company that is "good" and "a good match." Signaling one's prestige and niche in the Dutch field to the outside world again becomes important in the final stage of the acquisition process: the auction.

Finally, a coherent catalogue is important for sales agents to understand the identity of the publishing house and explain this to bookstores. Editors believe that readers have no clue of the publishers' existence. Dutch publishers do not sell their books to consumers directly and hardly do marketing research. Hence, consumers are not central in acquisition decisions, other than as a vague idea about the group of "people who read" or "people like me."

Publishers' real customers are not readers, but retailers. It is they who need to be convinced of the book's potential and a good catalogue gets your books into bookstores. With each new book season, sales agents get about half an hour to convince the booksellers of the six major chains (who control most of the market) to buy their new books. The publishers' catalogue, and its image and status, is used to convince the bookseller of your good taste in a certain genre. Publishers try to establish a name for themselves in, for instance, psychological thrillers so that the bookseller looking for psychological thrillers believes in their taste and reputation. A catalogue is, therefore, not a random assembly of titles but needs to be a coherent, logical whole that can be explained to other actors in the field. Amidst the isomorphism of national and transnational fields, distinction remains crucial when competing for a place in the bookstore.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have mapped the field of the Dutch literary field and then have shown how editors in that field organize decision-making to tackle the challenges of literary production in an era of overabundance and increasing globalization. While identifying three broad types of publishing houses, we found similarity in terms of the challenge confronting editors at all three types, as well as similar strategies for coping. Dutch acquisition editors are confronted with three main problems: an excess of new titles; uncertainty over the nature and quality of new titles; and strong competition. They cope with these challenges through decentralized networks; trust in their (increasingly transnational) networks and their own expertise; and the accumulation of symbolic capital, in particular through their publishers' respective catalogues. The focus on these catalogues, however, along with the constant reliance on information from others, leads to increasing isomorphism between national fields. Our analysis can be placed in the "production of culture" research tradition. Following the entire decision-making process in the acquisition of translations, we looked at literary production as a social and organizational process, embedded in wider national and transnational fields. Insights from neo-institutional sociology inspired us to look at institutional strategies and organizational practices, like the networked nature of the gatekeeping process, and the role of organizational innovations like the literary scout. It particularly drew our attention to editors' strategies for coping with the uncertainty inherent in all stages of editorial decision-making. Bourdieusian field theory, on the other hand, directed our gaze towards the status dynamics of the field and the central importance of editors' and publishing houses' cultural and symbolic capital in the acquisition of translation rights. In

particular the catalogue—simultaneously a material representation of taste and field position, and a means of communication—showed the usefulness of field theory for an understanding of editorial decision-making. We found this to be a fruitful combination: neo-institutionalism reminded us that the field of cultural production is not all about power, struggle, and status; while field theory kept us aware that literary acquisition is more than a quest for solutions to the practical problems that come with cultural production.

However, our analysis also adds something to these perspectives. First, we argue that the problem of abundance that so vexes literary editors cannot be reduced to a growth of uncertainty or an increase in competition. Abundance, as a consequence of increasing globalization, implies a qualitative change in the working of the literary field: more and more diverse manuscripts. The presence of a third “exotic” cluster of publishers in the Dutch literary field alongside the traditional popular and literary publishers attests to this development. In the wake of increasing diversity, the Dutch literary field has become more layered, adding a geographical-linguistic dimension to the classic highbrow–lowbrow or artistic-popular pole.

Second, we analyzed acquisition of translation rights as a gatekeeping *process*: occurring in several phases, and in interaction with different actors. This approach highlighted the variety of challenges editors encounter and the diverse strategies they employ to deal with these challenges. Thus, we could observe how editors’ practices and priorities shift according to situation, place, book, genre, and niche. Following the decision-making process, we found that uncertainty is an important concern at one point, abundance or competition at other points. Likewise, evaluation criteria varied, with the same editors using traditional literary and popular aesthetic criteria side by side. The Dutch literary field emerges as layered and multidimensional in nature, and not organized by one, clear logic. Thus, this study underlines other recent studies suggesting that cultural fields are less and less organized along the clear-cut divisions of art and money, highbrow and lowbrow (cf. Bielby, 2011; Craig and Dubois, 2010). Coping with this complexity is the next challenge for the production of culture approach in general and field theory specifically.

This analysis has several implications for further research. We argue that gatekeeping is a process with multiple stages, rather than a single decision-making moment. Gatekeepers do not “stand at the door” like a bouncer at a nightclub. Rather, acquiring editors are the centers of “gatekeeping networks.” In the global cultural marketplace, such gatekeeping networks provide crucial information and orientation. We believe that further study of gatekeeping networks enables us to understand better the production of literature and cultural goods. Moreover, we expect such “gatekeeping networks” to become increasingly central to cultural production in this globalized age (Kuipers, 2011). Studying such networks will allow us to investigate a traditional production of culture question: how particular (new) organizational forms and arrangements affect what gets published or disseminated.

Also, we show that isomorphism between national literary fields is not only created in top-down relations between dominant and dominated actors, either within or between national fields. Publishers in different countries that view each other as similarly positioned actively exchange information, manuscripts and taste repertoires on a cooperative basis. Hence, while literary fields *within* countries may be characterized by strife and competition, in particular within the same niche, *between* countries cooperation seems more common. As a result, institutional isomorphism is not only created in individual fields in a vertical manner, but also horizontally between fields. Rather than causing either homogenization or heterogenization (Crane, 2002), cultural globalization may lead to both: increased diversity within national fields, yet growing convergence between actors in, and structures of, national field. These mechanisms need to be

researched more thoroughly if we are to understand the ways in which globalization manifests itself in cultural industries.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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