

2017 Authors Guild Survey of Literary Translators’ Working Conditions: A Summary

The survey was distributed online in April 2017, to members of the Authors Guild, the American Literary Translators Association, the PEN America Translation Committee, and the American Translators Association’s Literary Division (approximately 1,200 total recipients), and was also publicized on social media. The survey was open to all translators, but focused on those who work in the U.S. and/or work predominantly with U.S. publishers.

This is the first-ever survey of its kind conducted in the United States, and one of its primary purposes is to serve as a baseline for future surveys, which the Authors Guild plans to conduct at 5-year intervals. We will also be studying the responses in order to refine and adapt the survey questions in the future.

Following are the key findings, collected from a total of 205 responses.

Demographics

Age:

4% aged 30 and under
34% aged 31–50
44% aged 51–70
16% aged 71 and over

Gender Identity:

59% identify as female
37% identify as male
(the remaining respondents selected “other” or “prefer not to say”)

Racial/Ethnic Identity:

83% White
6.5% Hispanic or Latinx
1.5% Black/African American
1.5% Asian American
1% Native American
(the remaining respondents selected “other” or “prefer not to say”)

Sexual Identity:

12.3% identify as LGBTQ+

Education and Experience

43% hold a Ph.D. or equivalent

34% hold an M.A. or equivalent

99.5% have completed some post-secondary education

Approximately 24% have a degree or other certification in translation

36% have been literary translators for more than 20 years

5% have been literary translators for 2 years or fewer

32% for 3–10 years

26% for 11–20 years

Although there is no “typical” literary translator, the findings above indicate that most of the survey respondents are highly educated, have many years of experience in the field, are women, and are overwhelmingly white.

Translation Fields

Roughly 68% of respondents translate fiction, 42% nonfiction, and 46% poetry, with smaller percentages translating theater, children’s and young adult literature, journalism, and other areas. (Note that the total is over 100% because many translators work in more than one area.)

Since the variables for poetry translation are extremely broad, and it is generally accepted that translators of poetry cannot expect to earn significant income from their work, the data reported below pertain only to translators of prose (fiction and nonfiction).

Languages Translated

Respondents translate from a total of 42 languages, the vast majority working into English. The most common languages were French, Spanish, German, and Italian, followed by Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Catalan, and Japanese, with the remaining languages numbering in the low single digits.

Full-Time vs. Part-Time

Only 14 respondents (7%) derive 100% of their income from literary translation or related activities (workshops, lectures, readings, book reviews, and so forth). 161 respondents (79%) earn less than 50% of their income from literary translation, and 28 respondents (14%) earn more than 50% but less than 100% of their income from literary translation.

A closely corresponding 15 respondents (again, 7%) state that they devote 100% of their work time to literary translation, whereas 124 respondents (61%) devote less than 50% of their time, and 64 respondents (32%) devote between 50% and 100% of their time. For the purpose of this summary, we have chosen to define “full-time translators” as those who spend more than 50% of their work time on literary translation.

Of translators who have other sources of income in addition to literary translation work, the largest groups are those who also work in non-literary translation (34%), college or university teachers (45%), writers or poets (37%), and publishers or editors (12%). Other positions include interpreting, professional fields (lawyers, journalists, accountants, etc.), and graduate students.

Income

In 2016, the gross income earned by full-time translators (as defined above) who primarily translate prose, was as follows:

32% earned less than \$10,000
33% earned \$10,000–\$20,000
18% earned \$20,000–\$30,000
9% earned \$30,000–\$60,000
4% earned \$60,000–\$80,000
4% earned \$80,000–\$100,000
Fewer than 1% earned over \$100,000

Incomes for 2012–15 were largely similar, and most respondents reported no significant change in their income from literary translation over the past 5 years.

Translation Rates

Translators use various methods to charge for a translation project, ranging from flat fees to hourly rates to rates per-word, per-page, or per-character. The majority of respondents reported a per-word rate; note, however, that the figures do not differentiate between source word and target word, which in some languages may be significantly different.

When asked to specify the rate for their most recent book translation, responses for prose translators varied from \$0 to more than \$0.20 per word, with the two largest segments charging \$0.00–\$0.07 per word and \$0.14 or \$0.15 per word, closely followed by \$0.10 per word. No significant difference was found in the rates commanded by male versus female translators.

There is no standard translation rate in the United States, nor are U.S. professional organizations permitted to recommend or publish rates. However, considering the rate “that UK publishers are prepared to pay,” as reported by the Society of Authors in the UK (“in the region of £95 per 1,000 words,” or about \$0.13 per word at the time of this writing), and the rate prescribed by the Canada Council for the Arts (\$0.18 Canadian per word, or \$0.14 U.S., for genres other than drama or poetry), it is clear that a large number of U.S. translators are being paid rates that make it difficult, if not impossible, to earn a living.

Royalties

Roughly 47% of respondents who translate primarily prose indicated that their contracts always or usually stipulate royalties, with 31% sometimes receiving a royalty clause, and 22% never

receiving one. Royalty rates vary from 0.5% to 5%, with the vast majority earning 1%. An impressive 47% also report that they have actually received royalty payments, in sums varying from “less than \$100” to “more than \$1,000” (with roughly a third of respondents in the latter category).

Of those whose contracts do not usually stipulate royalties, half report that the publisher refused to grant them. Here, too, no discernable difference was noted between male and female respondents. In the majority of cases among those whose contracts do stipulate royalties, the translator’s fee was considered an advance—namely, royalties go into effect after the initial fee is paid off.

We were heartened to learn that such a large percentage of translators are able to obtain a royalty clause in their contracts. This finding belies publishers’ oft-cited claim that they do not pay translators royalties as a matter of policy, or that publishers in general never pay translators royalties. It is also worth underscoring that although actual royalty payments are usually small, such payments do in fact occur, rendering the question of royalties more than a matter of principle.

Copyright

66% of prose translators report that they always or usually retain copyright on their translations, while 17% sometimes do, and 17% usually do not. In half of the cases where copyright was not granted to the translator, it was because the publisher refused. Once again, no significant differences were reported in male versus female responses in this area.

Under the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, “Translations, adaptations, arrangements of music and other alterations of a literary or artistic work shall be protected as original works without prejudice to the copyright in the original work.” This means the translator owns the copyright to a translation from the moment they create it. They may sign it away, but it is theirs by virtue of having created the translation, and their business should be conducted on the same footing as the author of the work in the original language.

Some publishers mistakenly continue to believe that the copyright needs to be theirs in order for them to make money on the translation. We will continue to educate publishers to correct this erroneous belief. Yet, by and large, university presses are the main offenders when it comes to usurping translators’ copyright.

Name on Cover

58% of respondents who said they mainly translate prose always or usually have their name on the cover of a book they have translated, while 19% sometimes have their name on the cover, and 23% never do. The gender breakdown here showed that a higher proportion of male respondents (61%) always or usually have their name on the cover than their female counterparts (51%). The two most common reasons for not having one’s name on the cover

were that the publisher refused, and either that it was not an important issue for the translator or the translator preferred to negotiate for other terms.

Reports from translators indicate that the reasons publishers most often give for refusing to put the translator's name on the cover are that it will clutter the design, that they do not want readers to know the book is translated because translations are a "turnoff," and that translations are hard enough to sell as it is without complicating things by putting another name on the cover. Plenty of presses, however, create gorgeous cover designs with no difficulty accommodating the translator's name. Moreover, some translators are well-known enough that having their name on the cover in fact makes it more likely a reader will pick it up, and it seems highly improbable that anyone who prefers not to read translations will be fooled by "hiding" the translator's name inside—sooner or later, the truth will out. From the translator's point of view, having their name on the cover is not only good publicity, which may lead to future income, but it also increases the likelihood that they will be mentioned in reviews of the book, where the translator's work is all too often ignored.

Grants

A worrying 41% of respondents report that payment of their fee has sometimes depended on the publisher receiving a grant.

We are fully aware that many publishers of translated literature are small, independent presses that operate as not-for-profit entities. We believe it is essential, however, that such presses develop business models that do not compel translators to bear the financial risk of translating entire books without being guaranteed payment for their work.

Further Thoughts and Next Steps

Considering the large number of respondents who report that they have not requested copyright or royalties—terms we consider essential—when negotiating a translation contract, as well as how many of them indicate that they are unaware of these rights or do not fully understand them, there is clearly still a great deal of education to be done within the translation community. This can hopefully be achieved by working with the various organizations to which translators belong (and we note that over 91% of respondents belong to at least one translation organization). It is also worth considering how the increasing number of literary translation programs in academia might address the practical, legal, and financial aspects of literary translation in their curricula.

There is a definite need for advocacy on behalf of translators' rights among publishers. A worryingly large percentage of respondents report that publishers have refused to grant them copyright and/or royalties. We hope that the data in this survey will impress upon translators that they can, and in many cases do, receive both of these important terms, and that, with support from the forthcoming Authors Guild model contract for literary translation, they will be emboldened to demand them when they negotiate their next translation contract.