

# True horror story

*Working as a literary translator in Europe can seriously damage your health, warns* **Ros Schwartz**

The European Council of Literary Translators Associations (CEATL) recently published a comparative survey of literary translators' income across Europe, based on data supplied by the member associations. The results are deeply disturbing. We found that in 20 of the 23 countries surveyed, literary translators' average purchasing power is more than 60 percent lower than that of workers in the manufacturing and service sectors.

There is only one country where literary translators earn more than 80 percent of the average income (France, 83%), while in Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom they earn little more than 70 percent. It seems that literary translators in the majority of European countries are living in poverty, and working very long hours. At the bottom of table are the Czech Republic, Greece and Slovakia.

So what do these chilling figures mean for those attempting to make a living translating the world's great writers? Literary translators have to juggle several jobs to make ends meet, often at the expense of their health and family lives. Even then, it is a struggle.

"Very often I can't make ends meet," says Klety Sotiriadou of Greece. "I translate about three books a year. When García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize, I had to work 14 hours a day to deliver all his novels and short story collections in two or three years." One of the authors of the study, Alena Lhotova, who is from the Czech Republic, says she could not make a living without a "small private income" and her husband's earnings.

Janos Lackfi from Hungary has to fit literary translation around his main job as a university lecturer. He is also an author, poet, literary critic and magazine editor, and regularly gives talks in schools and libraries.



*"My income is so low I don't pay taxes. The little I save usually goes on social security"*

"I am at my computer at least 10 hours a day. My family puts up with it," he says.

There is a myth that translators grow rich on royalties. Although in some countries a royalty clause is included in the contract, apart from the Dutch translator of *Harry Potter*, no literary translator has become a millionaire. Far from it. According to Anna Casassas of Spain: "Although, theoretically, translators in Spain receive royalties, in practice it doesn't happen. Of the 70-odd books I've translated, I receive royalties on two, and the amounts are risible."

A literary translator's income is mainly derived from three sources: the basic fee, royalties, and grants and subsidies. Royalties include a share of the proceeds from use of the work in all published forms (primary

rights), a share of the rights sales (additional and subsidiary rights) and a share of the monies gathered by collecting societies (mainly public lending right or PLR).

As well as significant variations in the basic fee in different countries, there are marked differences in the other two sources of income. In some countries PLR generates practically nothing, and grants and subsidies are non-existent. However, there are countries (particularly the Nordic countries and the Netherlands) where PLR and grants account for a significant proportion of income and can double the basic fee.

Discrepancies between the different social security and tax systems have a considerable impact on literary translators' income. It seems that the best country is Ireland, where translators are exempt from paying taxes. In other European countries not only do translators earn very little, but they also have a heavy social security burden. Jacqueline Csuss of Austria translates one or two books a year and survives by doing commercial translations. "I can easily earn in one month what I'm paid for an entire book, which is four months' work," she says. "My annual income is so low that I don't pay taxes. The little I manage to save usually goes on social security contributions. I don't know how I survive."

In the UK, only a handful of translators make a living solely from literary translation. Christine Shuttleworth also works as an indexer and, she says, "I just about manage to keep solvent". Sandra Smith, the acclaimed translator of Irène Nemirovsky, has a punishing schedule, teaching full-time at Cambridge University. "I need to teach for financial reasons," she says. "No wonder I'm always tired."

Lack of time is a grievance shared by literary translators in every country surveyed: lack of

## BALANCING THE BOOKS:

*Literary translators throughout Europe are struggling to make ends meet (right), and Martin de Haan, vice chair of CEATL and co-author of the survey (left), is no exception*



time to do a good job and lack of time to spend with family. As award-winning German translator Holger Fock, who was the driving force behind the CEATL survey, says: "I work around 70 hours a week. I take two or three weeks' holiday a year. I'm never ill – I don't have time to be ill. This takes a heavy toll on my family life – my children complain about their father's 'absent presence' – and affects my health (back, knee, elbow). In short, we work like 19th-century weavers for an income that is barely higher than being on benefits."

When it comes to contracts, again there are vast differences. Some countries have standard contracts drawn up in agreement with the publishers, while others, including the UK, propose a model contract (a suggested contract for Literary Translation Association members) or publish recommendations. While in 13 countries/regions the association recommends a minimum rate, there are only six countries that have succeeded in agreeing a minimum rate with publishers. In most countries, translators receive an initial payment when the contract is signed and the remainder on delivery of the translation to the publisher.

Generally speaking, royalties generate additional income for translators only in countries where publishers sell large numbers of books (10,000 copies or more). But nowhere does the amount paid in royalties exceed five percent of literary translators' total annual income. It is noticeable that literary translators' income is generally higher and more stable in countries where agreements regarding fees and royalties exist between translators and publishers. In the countries with a large paperback market and a growing audio book market, additional and subsidiary rights

can considerably increase income. In general, the number and total amount of grants awarded to translators are negligible.

Most translators continue working well beyond retirement age. State pensions vary widely. In Denmark, translators can expect a state pension of €1,000-€1,500 a month, but in the UK they only receive €650. Tax rates, too, range considerably – from 0 percent in Ireland to 52 percent in the Netherlands.

In Italy, the situation is disastrous. In Greece, Germany, Finland, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, the material situation of translators is critical, and professional literary translators are virtually on the bread line. It is also worth noting that Spain shows higher figures only because literary translators manage a much higher output – at the expense of literary quality.

Martin de Haan, a co-author of the survey, stresses: "This is a serious social problem on a continent that is meant to be developed, multilingual and multicultural, but it is also, and most importantly, a very serious artistic and cultural problem. Indeed, what does it say about the quality of literary exchange between our societies if literary translators are forced to dash off their work just to keep afloat?"

It also has implications for the continuation of the profession. In the words of Søren Barsøe from Denmark: "Newcomers can't make a living from literary translation. Even if you're in work all the time, you only make about half of what is considered a low income in Denmark. And being new, you aren't able to negotiate a higher fee."

CEATL has formulated a number of recommendations for improving working conditions, including a fair share in any exploitation of the work; contract law

stipulating fair and adequate remuneration; index-linked fees; improved grant systems, eg higher sums and greater reliability of grants as additional income; improved social security provisions; and tax incentives.

Improved remuneration and status are linked to increased visibility. Translators' names should appear on book covers and on all promotional material. We need to raise awareness of our art among reviewers and readers through events highlighting literary translation and translators. And we need awards for literary translation as an art.

Some national funding bodies, such as the Arts Council of England, offer incentives to publishers, including subsidies towards translation costs, but further support is needed for scouting, providing sample translations and marketing.

We also need incentives to encourage talented translators to join the profession, such as translation-specific language-learning courses for languages of limited diffusion; grants and residencies not only for professional translators but also for students and translators at the beginning of their careers; and exchange programmes. New initiatives could include internships with publishers, theatres and dubbing companies to learn about the industry; professional development programmes; and financial support for sabbaticals.

Sadly, the objectives outlined in the 1976 UNESCO Nairobi Recommendation on the Legal Protection of Translators and Translations and the Practical Means to improve the Status of Translators are far from being fulfilled. It is time to act!

To download the full survey, visit [www.ceatl.eu](http://www.ceatl.eu).