

## Working for peanuts. The economic situation of Hungarian literary translators

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### Abstract

Within the framework of Literary Translator Studies, this paper will examine the social status and working conditions of literary translators working into Hungarian. The invisibility of literary translators affects their remuneration, hence their production and circumstances. CEATL and the Hungarian Association of Literary Translators surveyed the working conditions of Hungarian literary translators in 2008, 2012, and 2020. I conducted an interim survey in 2018, which was followed by a smaller-scale investigation limited to Italian-speaking literary translators. A few reports about the current situation were published by literary translators and journalists whose statements were confirmed by interviews with literary translators, and by research findings. The latter reveal that the general perception of the societal role and importance of literary translators arises from limited and often biased information available to the public about the profession. The worsening economic position of translators has led to increasing amateurism, as a full-time job barely provides subsistence, which probably lessens professional pride and possibly capabilities. It also means an increasing number of career changes, leading to fewer literary translations by professionals and/or experts.

### Keywords

literary translators, perception of literary translation, working conditions, remuneration, translator invisibility

## 1. Growing interest in literary translation & literary translators

Within the framework of Literary Translator Studies (Chesterman, 2009; Kaindl *et al.*, 2021), this paper will examine the social status and working conditions of Hungarian literary translators who translate into their mother tongue, demonstrating how the well-known invisibility of literary translators affects their remuneration, hence their production and circumstances (Klaudy, 2012).

The project uses mixed methods, analysing quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from interviews and situation reports. The European Council of Literary Translators' Associations (*Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires*, CEATL) together with the Hungarian Association of Literary Translators (MEGY) surveyed working conditions for Hungarian literary translators in 2011, 2013 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> I also conducted an interim survey in 2018 (Sohár, 2019, 2021, 2023), which was followed by a smaller-scale investigation limited to Italian-speaking literary translators in Hungary (Burkus, forthcoming). A few situation reports on the current state of literary translation in Hungary have also been published by literary translators and journalists (Halasi, 2003; Papolczy, 2015; R. Kiss, 2015; Bozai, 2021; Bödök, 2022), whose findings are borne out by interviews with literary translators (e.g., Baróthy, 2011; Németh, 2021; Szekeres, 2021), and the present article.

Being a Finno-Ugric language on the periphery of the European cultural polysystem, Hungarian has always relied on translation to a great extent, because the majority of the population lack foreign language skills.<sup>2</sup> Like in many other cultures, the oldest surviving texts are all literary translations. The neologist movement in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries aiming to turn Hungarian into a modern national language fit for intellectuals and the upper classes mainly built its language reform on literary—and to some extent scholarly—translations (e.g., Czigány, 1984; Sohár, 1995; Laakso, 2014). Literary translation became particularly important during the Communist era when the relevant authorities tightly controlled the selection and production of texts; language skills and the ability to translate from/into foreign languages were considered suspicious yet were also sought after. As a result, those who were allowed to do literary translations were well paid (e.g., Géher, 1989; Sohár, 2022). However, with the political transformation in 1990, literary translators lost their relatively privileged place. Their social status and economic situation changed radically in a very short time—for the worse. This paper aims to describe the present state of affairs and its foreseeable consequences together with efforts by Hungarian literary translators to remedy their circumstances. Since there is no reliable data about the number of practising literary translators, and membership in organisations which include literary translators (MEGY: 142,<sup>3</sup> Society of Hungarian Authors approx. 122,<sup>4</sup> Hungarian Writers' Association Literary Translators' Division: 82,<sup>5</sup> Hungarian PEN Club: approx. 65<sup>6</sup>) often overlaps, the findings based on the aforementioned online surveys may prove to be somewhat unrepresentative, but they certainly indicate trends.

The emergence of Literary Translator Studies has brought literary translators into focus, particularly their agency, their cultural influence, their working methods, and their lives (see e.g., Kaindl *et al.*, 2021). Some studies concentrate on the contradiction between their rather poor—and declining—living and working conditions versus job satisfaction. It is generally

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the Hungarian data in the 2020 survey findings see Galambos, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign\\_language\\_skills\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign_language_skills_statistics).

<sup>3</sup> Email from the president of MEGY on January 17, 2023. MEGY had 170 members in 2013, and 135 in 2018.

<sup>4</sup> My calculation based on the online CVs of all members.

<sup>5</sup> Email from the division president on January 18, 2023. The division had 101 members in 2018.

<sup>6</sup> My calculation based on the online CVs of all members.

agreed (e.g., Sela-Sheffy, 2005, 2008; Liu, 2013; Dam & Korning Zethsen, 2016; Heino, 2017; Bednárová-Gibová & Madoš, 2019; Svahn, 2020; Mirsafian *et al.*, 2021) that translator job satisfaction is outstanding: translators love their work, which may and indeed very often does counterbalance low wages and uncertain career prospects, “[t]hat is to say, professional literary translators gain a sort of satisfaction from their job which is manifested in their willingness to work for low incomes” (Mirsafian *et al.*, 2021, p. 455). In Hungary, comparatively few researchers have taken an interest in translator status, self-image and working conditions so far, as shown by the only Hungarian-language Translation Studies journal:<sup>7</sup> not a single publication discusses the sociological aspects of (literary) translation. I know of only two relevant doctoral research projects: Galambos (2021) focuses on the relationship between the perception of literary translation and the situation of literary translators in literary journals, while Burkus (forthcoming) compares the socio-economic circumstances of literary translators in France and Hungary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The same holds true for the economic aspects of literature. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute for Literary Studies at the Research Center for the Humanities has had a research group called MTA–BTK Momentum Political Economy of Hungarian Literature since 2019, which “examines the intersections of literature and economy in their joint embeddedness in two parallel social and political processes: those of *nation-building* and *capitalist transformation*. By the former we mean the urge to promote the awareness of idiosyncratic cultural forms, by the latter the tendency of turning all kinds of assets and goods into marketable items of exchange”.<sup>8</sup> It seems saddening—and unfortunately typical—that literary translation has not been mentioned in this project to date.

However, it seems that literary translators who used to meekly accept their lot are increasingly trying to win back their dwindling prestige, influence and social standing.<sup>9</sup> Professionalization appears to be a possible remedy to all these problems, together with proper institutions, training programmes, degrees, standardisation (cf. the PETRA-E framework) and official recognition. This turn is still happening and the outcome is unforeseeable as yet, particularly if we take into account the as yet unknown impact of machine translation and artificial intelligence on translation (see e.g., Toral & Way, 2015; Peng, 2018; Webster *et al.*, 2020).

## 2. Literary translation in Hungary

In peripheral cultures such as Hungary, where literary translation used to have a more prominent cultural role than in central cultures, translators were traditionally perceived as important cultural actors. Their agency in shaping the culture was conspicuous to the discerning eye, yet unnoticed by the man in the street. Only those literary translators who were also involved in other creative activities such as writing or the arts tended to be known to the general public, since as a rule, the best poets translated world literature. Interestingly, up to the 1960s, the

<sup>7</sup> The journal *Fordítástudomány* (Translation Studies, est. 1999) so far has published one paper dealing with the oeuvre of a particular literary translator (2011), and one interview with a practising literary translator (2003), but neither mentions any socio-economic aspect or the profession at all.

<sup>8</sup> <https://polecolit.abtk.hu/en/about-us/>

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, the *#namethetranslator* movement initiated by Helen Wang (Society of Authors) on Twitter in December 2013, The Quebec Declaration on Literary Translation and Translators (2015, <https://wa1.fit-ift.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Quebec-Manifesto-ENGLISH-Print.pdf>), the translators on the cover EU report (2022).

Hungarian word for literary translator, *műfordító*<sup>10</sup> exclusively referred to those who translated poetry: translating plays or prose was regarded as inferior (Bart, 2002, p. 140). Actors within the literary scene disdained translators of novels and dramas on two grounds: writers of original works, including literary critics, looked down on them, as did ‘real’ literary translators who turned poetry into Hungarian. Nevertheless, before the political transformation in 1990, the state-owned publishing houses remunerated Hungarian literary translators relatively well for their work (e.g., Tandori, 2000;<sup>11</sup> 2003; Sohár, 2019). The situation changed radically when many new actors, publishing houses, editors and translators entered the scene. Strict control over literary translations came to an end and they became profit-oriented market products. All these changes led to tighter deadlines, only nominally increasing fees and therefore decreasing real wages (purchasing power), and fewer collaborators across the translating and publishing process which resulted in published texts of lower quality—at least according to the readers who often complain about the fluency of texts and translation blunders on specialised social media—such as Goodreads.com or moly.hu—and in general.<sup>12</sup> The coronavirus pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine, the resultant high inflation and deep energy crisis have not bettered the working conditions of Hungarian literary translators.

### 3. The survey respondents

The following section draws on data from the 2011, 2013 and 2020 CEATL-MEGY surveys as well as my own in 2018. I do not use Burkus’s 2021 survey since it was limited to Italian-speaking literary translators. Unfortunately, the surveys did not use the same questionnaire or methodology and their foci also differ. For example, they used dissimilar age categories and reached different subdivisions of the target group depending on the survey method (2011 and 2013 were done by correspondence, 2018 and 2020 online). However, all surveys gathered data on the age pyramid, gender distribution, working hours, and translation rates. These data appear to be comparable and point in the same direction.

All the surveys had a relatively small number of respondents (2011: 26; 2013: 41; 2018: 84; 2020: 52/84; 2021: 15). Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents per age group. Translators of all ages took an interest in the surveys. It is unsurprising that the literary translators aged between 30 and 45 appear to be the most active, and as they are getting older, the proportion of the next age group increases. I cannot offer an explanation for the irregularity observed in the 2013 survey, when 27% of the respondents were over 66 years old while in other surveys their proportion remained under 20%. The 2020 survey attracted the highest rate of career-starters: although the professional organisations always state that young literary translators are scarce, for example, the president of the Hungarian Writers’ Association Literary Translators’ Division mentioned in his email on January 18, 2023 that none of their members was under 35. This

<sup>10</sup> Literally artistic translator. However, the first part, *mű-*, an abbreviation of *művészi* [artistic], also means [artificial; false; feigned; manmade; synthetic; imitation; faux], hence Tandori’s wordplay in the title of his 2000 essay: *Műfordító mint mű* which could be translated as *Literary translator as literary work*, or as *Literary translator as imitation* (see References).

<sup>11</sup> Dezső Tandori (1938–2019), a poet, writer and literary translator, wrote in his reminiscences of the Communist era: “Műfordítóként olyan rendesen kerestem, hogy mindent megengedhettem magamnak, ami csak szerény fantáziámba fért” [As literary translator, I earned so much that I could afford anything within my modest imagination].

<sup>12</sup> For instance, on January 31, 2023, the publisher MMA Kiadó withdrew the Hungarian version of *Music as an Art* by Roger Scruton due to the faulty, publicly criticised translation, and promised to make amends. The translation criticism: <https://www.prae.hu/article/13273-hangosztaly-vigyazz/>. The announcement: <https://www.prae.hu/news/42340-visszavonja-es-felulvizsgalja-az-mma-kiado-a-scruton-a-zenerol-cimu-konyvet/>.

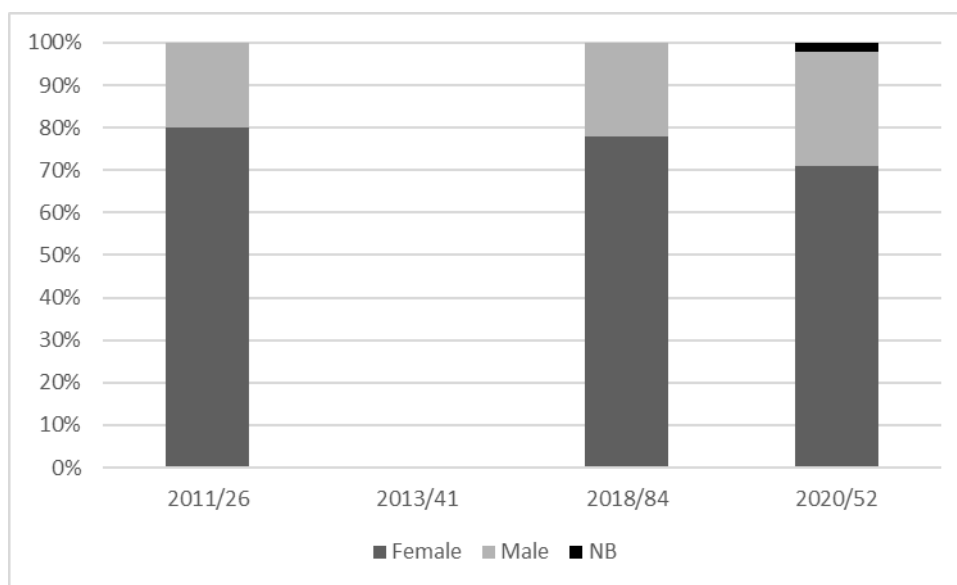
could be explained by the conditions of membership in such associations: they usually require two or three already published books from those who wish to join them.

Survey	Age groups and their proportion				
2011	25-35	35-45	45-55	55-65	> 65
2011	11%	<b>50%</b>	<b>4%</b>	15%	19%
2013	< 35	36-45	46-55	56-65	> 66
2013	12%	<b>34%</b>	17%	<b>10%</b>	27%
2018	< 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	> 60
2018	<b>10%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>	15%	15%
2020	< 35	36-45	46-55	56-65	> 65
2020	17%	<b>31%</b>	18%	<b>15%</b>	19%

**Table 1.** Age of respondents

Note: the highest proportions against a black background, the lowest in bold

Figure 1 attests that literary translation is a feminised occupation, though the proportion of those who identify as male or non-binary has grown by 9 per cent in a decade. Usually feminised occupations have relatively high social prestige, but low wages (cf. teachers, nurses); they are of vital importance, yet financially unappealing. If more men opt for literary translation, does it mean that we can expect better remuneration in the future? It is also possible that the proportion has not changed at all, men just have become more active in their professional capacities, or they may be more willing to participate in online surveys than offline ones. This tendency needs further investigation in order to establish its causes.



**Figure 1.** Number and gender of respondents

Table 2 shows how much time respondents spend on literary translation-related activities. It has been simplified into three categories, although these categories vary in each survey: for instance, the Authors' Guild's definition of full-time translators are those who spend more than 50% of their work time on literary translation, while the CEATL survey expects at least 80% of working hours from a full-time practitioner. Nevertheless, the tendency is clear: the number of hobby translators has been increasing, the number of full-time translators seems dwindling, while the number of half-time translators has stagnated since 2011. This tendency goes against

the professionalization hypothesis: if translators need other sources of income to make ends meet and do not translate every day, it takes longer to gain knowledge about the translation process, strategies, transfer operations, to learn the necessary routines and expertise, to build a peer network, professional image, and so on. Hobby translators are probably less inclined to invest in continuing professional development. They may not know the legal niceties, join professional organisations (if they are eligible), and are generally more defenceless than full-time translators, though even the latter are not well protected (see e.g., the case of Amanda Gorman's Catalan translator).

Year	Full-time	Half-time	Hobby
2011	< 75%	33-50%	< 33%
2011	<b>35%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>25%</b>
2013	< 75%	33-66%	< 33%
2013	<b>29.5%</b>	<b>43.5%</b>	<b>27%</b>
2018	< 75%	25-74%	< 25%
2018	<b>26%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>34%</b>
2020	< 80%	25-79%	< 25%
2020	<b>27%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>31%</b>

**Table 2.** Professional status of respondents

Assuredly, the growing proportion of hobby translators is due to the fact that literary translators barely earn a living, as the next figure will demonstrate.

### Gross rates for translating 1,800 n / 40,000 n

The surveys tried to establish the income earned by literary translation, how much publishers pay on average, how much translators would like to take home a month, and what payment they find excellent, acceptable, or poor.<sup>13</sup> The questionnaires again used different classifications, so I converted the available data into the unit of measurement used in the 2020 CEATL survey with fees based on a page of 1,800 n, that is, keystroke. In Hungary, the customary basis for calculating the length of a literary translation is the *szerezői ív* [author's sheet], and the Hungarian surveys used this measurement to assess the translators' annual workload and income generated.

It also has to be taken into consideration that in Hungary, literary translators, together with other creative workers producing copyrightable material, are regarded just like any other self-employed business(wo)men, sole traders, or individual contractors, irrespective of their unique economic status. This means that no minimal fee is agreed upon and price fixing is forbidden. The 2018 survey did not ask how much translators earn; rather it tried to establish the amounts which were considered extremely bad, bad, good, or extremely good rates per decade after 1990, and what translators think of their fees (Sohár, 2019). The answers reveal that 92 % think their remuneration was bad/extremely bad after 1990, which is interesting in comparison with the fees shown in Figure 2, indicating what rates seem good or extremely good to some—or most—literary translators in Hungary. When literary translator Lídia Nádori, now president of

<sup>13</sup> The next step in this research project will be working out the "[f]orgone income, or 'opportunity cost,' [...] the difference between the low income earned by an artist (in this article, a literary translator) and what could be earned from the best-paid alternative occupation (matched in terms of skills and abilities)" (Mirsafian *et al.*, 2021, 436).



MEGY, claimed in 2011 that Hungarian literary translators received the lowest fees in Europe (Baróthy, 2011), she was probably not exaggerating much.

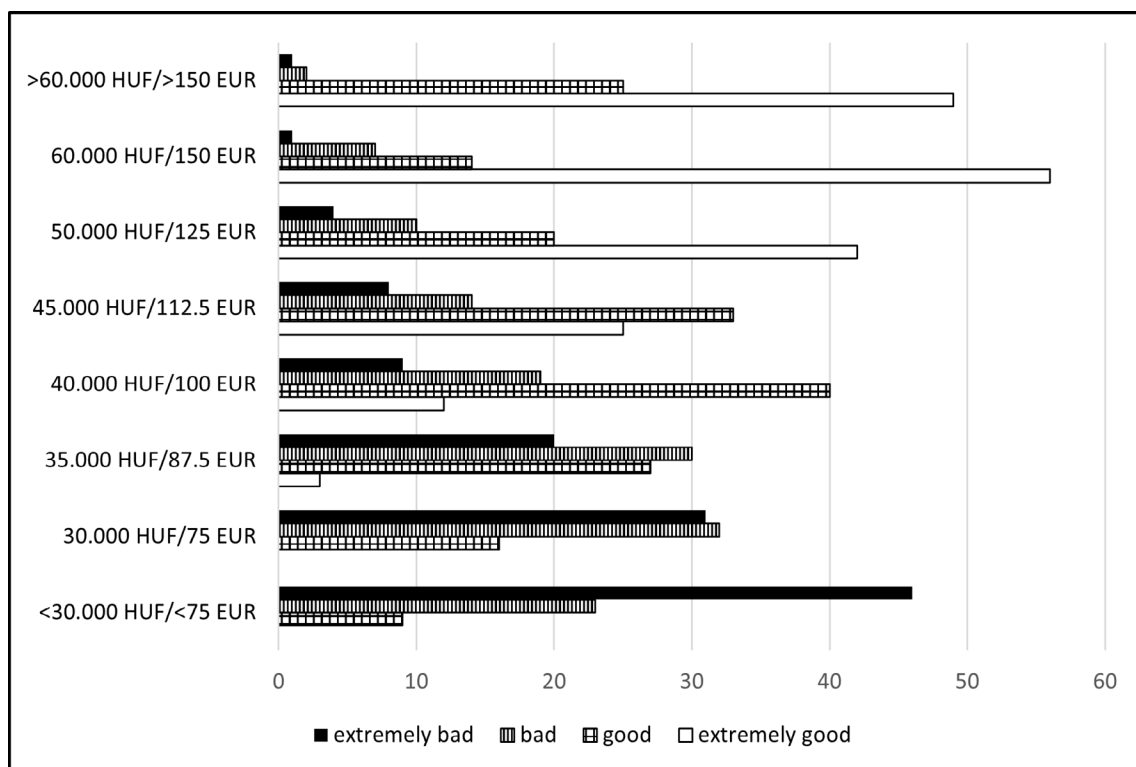


Figure 2. Literary translations' opinion about fees (per author's sheet in HUF/EUR, Sohár 2019)<sup>14</sup>

To make the comparison easier, I give these rates converted to a page (1,800 n) from top to bottom: more than €6.75, €6.75, € 5.625, €4.5, €3.93, €3.375, less than €3.375. It is striking that while the majority finds the top four highest rates good/extremely good, there are a few respondents who mark these as extremely bad. I can only suppose that these answers came from those who translate not **into**, but **from** Hungarian. Their fees are, of course, a separate issue. For instance, the Petőfi Literary Fund promoting the translation and publication of Hungarian literature abroad offers translation grants to beginner literary translators (150,000 HUF/€ 375 for 300 lines of poetry, 30 pages of narrative, or 40 pages of plays, 2-3 HUF per keystroke), and to expert translators of Hungarian literature (300,000 HUF/€750 for 500 lines of poetry, 50 pages of narrative, 40 pages of plays, 3-4 HUF per keystroke).<sup>15</sup>

The other three surveys asked literary translators how much they earned and what rates they were offered by publishers (see Figures 3, 4). The average fee increased by 13% between 2011 and 2020, while the minimum fee stagnated between 2011 and 2013 (we can safely ignore the maximum fee since it might be a one-off). Advances have practically stopped since 1990. There was, however, a huge leap in rates from 2013 to 2020. The latter puzzles me since I am aware that even in 2023, in the midst of the global polycrisis, with record inflation impacting food prices across Europe, most Hungarian literary translators have to fight—or beg—for the

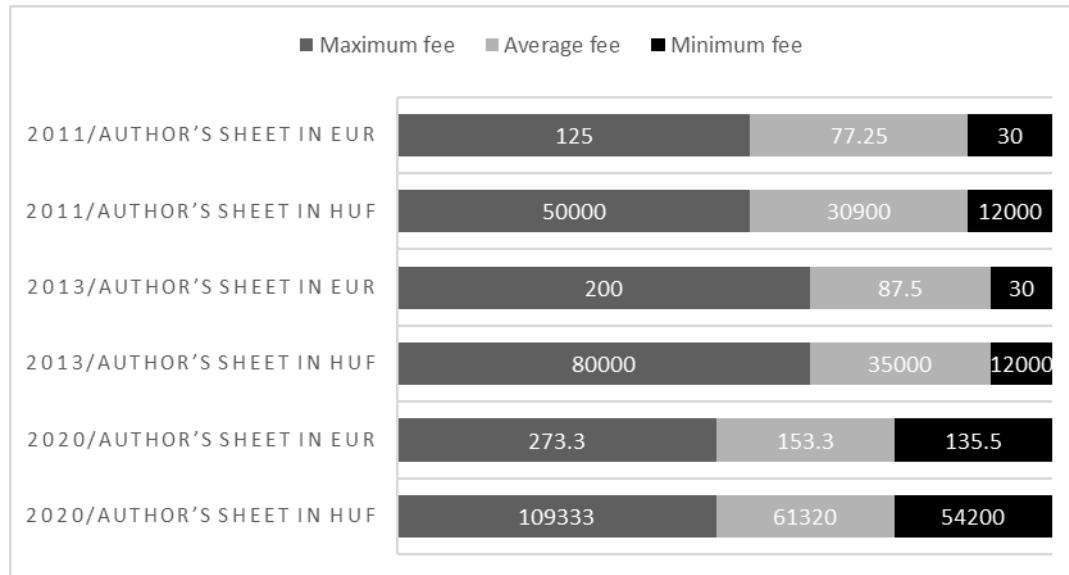
<sup>14</sup> The horizontal axis shows the number of respondents.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.petofiugynokseg.hu/hirek/palyazatok/mintaforditasi-palyazat-a-magyar-irodalom-palyakezdo-forditoi-szamara-20231.html>, <https://www.petofiugynokseg.hu/hirek/palyazatok/mintaforditasi-palyazat-a-magyar-irodalom-tapasztalt-forditoi-szamara-20231.html>.

standard rate<sup>16</sup> of 40,000-45,000 HUF per author's sheet (3.93-4.5 € per page), and not all such attempts have achieved such a modest raise. This huge leap in rates might be explained by the use of different currencies, leading to exchange rate errors since the Hungarian forint has recently been highly volatile. An alternative hypothesis is that several respondents actually translate for foreign publishers who pay much better rates. It may also result from a different method of calculation.



**Figure 3.** Maximum, average, and minimum literary translation fees per page



**Figure 4.** Maximum, average, and minimum literary translation fees per author's sheet

According to the 2020 CEATL survey, Hungarian literary translators are paid well below the European average. Hungary ranks 25th out of 30 countries, ahead of Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. Considering that all recent surveys claim that many literary “translators are being paid rates that make it difficult, if not impossible, to earn a living” (e.g.,

<sup>16</sup> Note that the price of typing is often 1 HUF per keystroke, which equals the 40,000 HUF per author's sheet rate for literary translation.



Authors Guild, 2017; CEATL, 2020), are Hungarian literary translators close to or even below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold?<sup>17</sup>

It should also be noted that royalties are practically unknown in Hungary. If they are included in a contract, payment starts at over 10,000 copies sold, while the average sale is usually between 2,000 and 2,500. Before the 2020 CEATL survey, there were no questions about collectively managed rights and public lending rights, therefore the first data collected is quite recent: the literary translators answering this question claimed to have received 297,600 HUF (€744) in total per person in 2018, and 295,000 HUF (€739) in 2019 from this source. These sums seem to reinforce my hypothesis that many respondents were translators of Hungarian literature into other languages.

Besides translation rates, royalties and the income from collectively managed rights and public lending rights, literary translators may get paid for related activities, such as editing or teaching literary translation, mentoring or tutoring, lecturing, courses or workshops, and criticism (cf. Gulyás, 2023). The total sums earned this way are generally negligible, but with great variation.

#### 4. Output: translated amount, working hours, and quality

Earnings also depend on production, not just rates, therefore the 2011, 2013 and 2018 surveys asked about annual or daily translation output. These numbers fluctuate, of course, since output is heavily influenced by several factors, including difficulty, experience, genre, annual number of commissions, external circumstances and so on. Still, the answers lay bare some thought-provoking tendencies.

In 2011, the average annual amount of prose translated by an individual was 1,400,000 n<sup>18</sup> (in contrast with 1,800,000-2,000,000 n<sup>19</sup> in Europe). It rose to 1,600,000 n<sup>20</sup> in 2013, but in that year, the average among full-time literary translators was 2,520,000 n,<sup>21</sup> which is at least 33% higher than the Hungarian average, and at least 25% higher than the European one. In 2011, 12 respondents out of 23 translated less than a million n,<sup>22</sup> in 2013 the minimum quantity translated amounted to 240,000 n for prose, and 40,000 n for verse.<sup>23</sup> I am convinced that the amount translated by part-time literary translators reduces the averages considerably. Unfortunately, the medians of these surveys are unknown. Nevertheless, it seems that full-time professional literary translators in Hungary have always had to work more than their colleagues in most European countries.

The 2018 survey tried to establish how much a literary translator should translate a day in order to earn a comfortable living and whether it was possible without compromising quality. Zoltán Halasi, an excellent literary translator from German and an outspoken defender of literary translators' rights, asked the best literary translators in 2003. Based on the 40 respondents' answers<sup>24</sup>—appalling working conditions, and rates—he concluded that literary translation

<sup>17</sup> The at-risk-of-poverty rate is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers.

<sup>18</sup> 35 author's sheets, 778 pages.

<sup>19</sup> 45-50 author's sheets, 1,000-1,111 pages.

<sup>20</sup> 40 author's sheets, 889 pages.

<sup>21</sup> 63 author's sheets, 1,400 pages.

<sup>22</sup> Less than 25 author's sheets, 555 pages.

<sup>23</sup> 6 author's sheets, 133 pages (prose), 1 author's sheet, 22 pages (verse).

<sup>24</sup> The average fee was then 20,000 HUF (€80) for an author's sheet, thus careful, good quality literary translation earned a gross monthly income of 80,000 HUF (€320) when the net average wage was 91,865 HUF (€367).

was luxury, and, more often than not, had become hackwork. Summarising his survey he claimed that 160,000 n (which equals 8,000 n per day)<sup>25</sup> can be adequately translated a month (2003). If we accept Halasi's claim, the 2018 responses (Table 3) seem to indicate a worse state of affairs: only one person thought that this would bring in enough to live on, and most respondents named double or even more.<sup>26</sup>

It seems extraordinary that 34 respondents<sup>27</sup> out of 86 would or could not say how much they needed to translate for a comfortable living. Researchers can only try to guess the cause: many people working in creative areas do not have any entrepreneurial skills, including business planning, time management, basic profession-specific financial and legal information, and the legalities of contracts, even if they have a degree or diploma in translation. Literary translators may not even be aware of their own monthly expenditure,<sup>28</sup> and since their income fluctuates, they may not feel the need for conscious budgeting. In Hungary, public education does not teach the basics of economics, or law, the necessary knowledge for managing a household, or a small business, therefore only those who learn the particulars on their own, or specialise in these fields have a clear overview of what their profession requires from a business standpoint.

character (n)	page (1,800 n)	author's sheet (40,000 n)	respondents (61)
5,000	3	0.125	1.75% (1)
8-10,000	4-6	0.2-0.25	7% (4)
10-12,000	6-7	0.25-0.3	3.5% (2)
<b>13-15,000</b>	<b>7-8</b>	<b>0.3-0.375</b>	<b>10.5% (6)</b>
15-20,000	8-11	0.375-0.5	8.75% (5)
<b>20,000</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>24.5% (14)</b>
20-25,000	11-14	0.5-0.625	7% (3)
20-30,000	11-17	0.5-0.75	3.5% (2)
30,000	17	0.75	3.5% (2)
35,000	19	0.875	1.75% (1)
<b>40,000</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14% (8)</b>
40-80,000	22-44	1-2	1.75% (1)
I don't know			8.75% (5)
depends on fee & quality requirements			1.75% (1)
lots, several hours each day			1.75% (1)
impossible to earn enough			1.75% (1)

**Table 3.** Daily translated amounts necessary for subsistence in 2018

Note: The most common answers in bold.

<sup>25</sup> 4 author's sheets, 89 pages monthly, that is, 1,920,000 n, 48 author's sheets, 1,067 pages yearly. This corresponds to the European average.

<sup>26</sup> Since according to Eurostat ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/european\\_economy/bloc-1c.html](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/european_economy/bloc-1c.html)), Hungarian prices have increased by 129.1% between 2000 and 2021, doubling production cannot make up for inflation.

<sup>27</sup> Five people explicitly stated that they did not know, but another 29 ignored this question.

<sup>28</sup> Often with such disclaimers as "I'm a (wo)man of letters, not numbers" or "I'm an artist, not an accountant."

The biggest amount is sixteen times more than the smallest one, while both end values seem unlikely at first glance: if a translator could produce 44 pages a day, then their gross income, even with the worst available rate, would be 50,000 HUF (€125) a day; in twenty workdays it would reach one million HUF (€2,500) a month, while the smallest output, even with an improbable 100,000 HUF (€250) per author's sheet rate, would only earn 250,000 HUF (€625) a month. But even if we focus on the more realistic amounts, the two values selected by most people, 20,000 n and 40,000 n, show a significant difference in productivity. This may be explained by different notions of livelihood (e.g., whether a two-week-long annual holiday, or professional conference expenses are included), but it may also be due to different rates.<sup>29</sup> If a literary translator has a well-paid specialism or a rare but sought-after language pair, they can afford to translate just 5,000 n a day. But those who translate pulp fiction from English may need to work harder and faster, skipping research and revision to earn an average income. However, I suspect that the translator's status explains this difference as well as the relatively large proportion of those who could not answer: if literary translation is considered a leisure pursuit, then obviously daily output will fall. Nor will hobby translators register the time spent on translating.

Working hours are another interesting yet idiosyncratic variable (for the data see Sohár 2019). Some people translate 3-5 hours a day (18 people), the majority has a full working day (6-8 hours, 33 people), while a few respondents (6) do not know how many hours they work, or give an outlying answer (1 hour or 9-10 hours). Since literary translation requires a lot of creativity, it is evident that translators cannot be inspired eight hours day in, day out. And, while revision and research demand a little less creativity, they cannot be done well if the translator is already mentally and physically exhausted after several hours of work. A 6-7 hour workday therefore seems realistic.

## 5. Earnings and taxation: adequate living standards?

According to the general consensus in the surveys, for adequate living standards a literary translator has to translate 6 to 8 hours a day, translating at least 20,000 n, that is, between 2,500 and 3,333 n/hour. In doing so, the translator earned €31-€75 a day or €620-€1,500 per month in 2018, rising to €68-€137 a day or €1,360-€2,740 per month in 2020, depending on the rate (Figure 5).

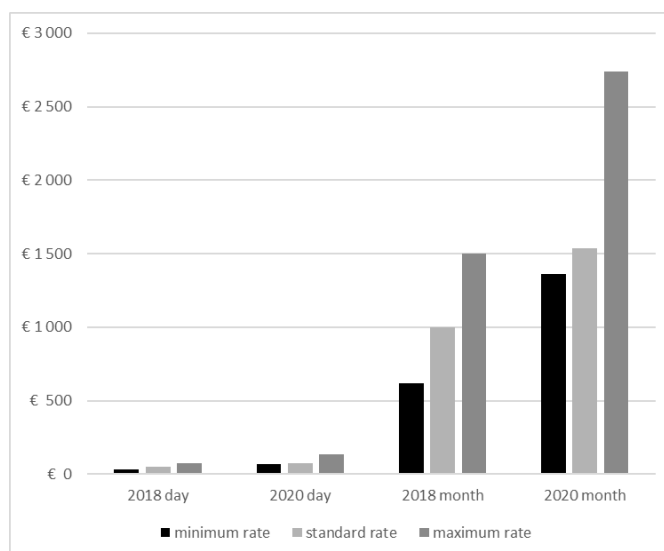
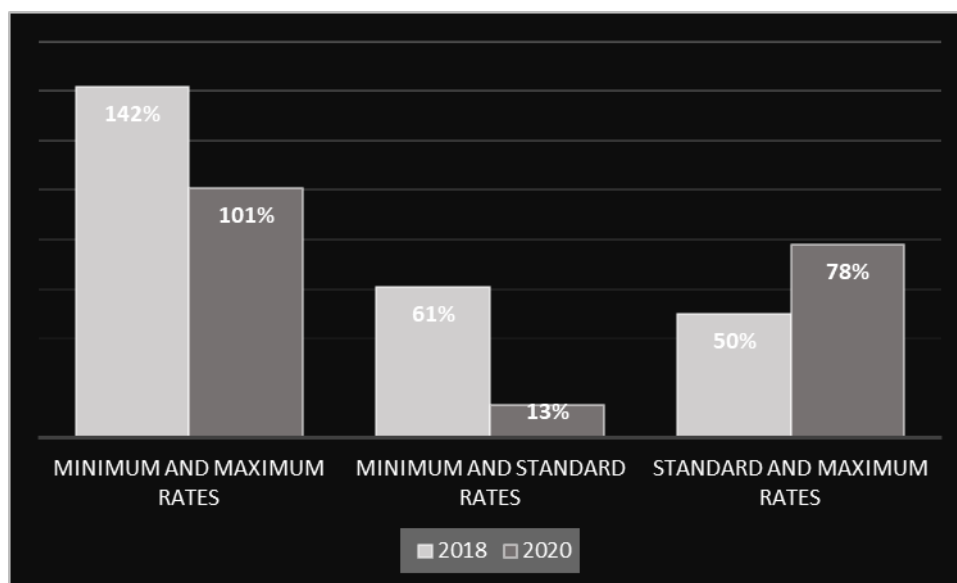


Figure 5. Daily and monthly gross income translating the average amount

<sup>29</sup> Or to the use of CAT tools, including machine translation.

All rates increased in the two years under investigation, the minimum rate by 119%, the maximum rate by 83%, while the commonest standard rate grew only by 54%. The gaps between rates (Figure 6) also imply that the real value—and purchasing power—only in the case of the standard rate lessened. The difference between the minimum and maximum rates used to be 142% in 2018, which decreased to 101% in 2020 which means that the maximum rate was still more than double of the minimum rate. Meanwhile the difference between the standard and maximum rates increased from 50% to 78%, and the difference between the standard and minimum rates dropped from 61% to just 13%. Therefore, it can be concluded that while the maximum and minimum rates were definitely on the increase, the most common standard lost value.



**Figure 6.** The difference between rates

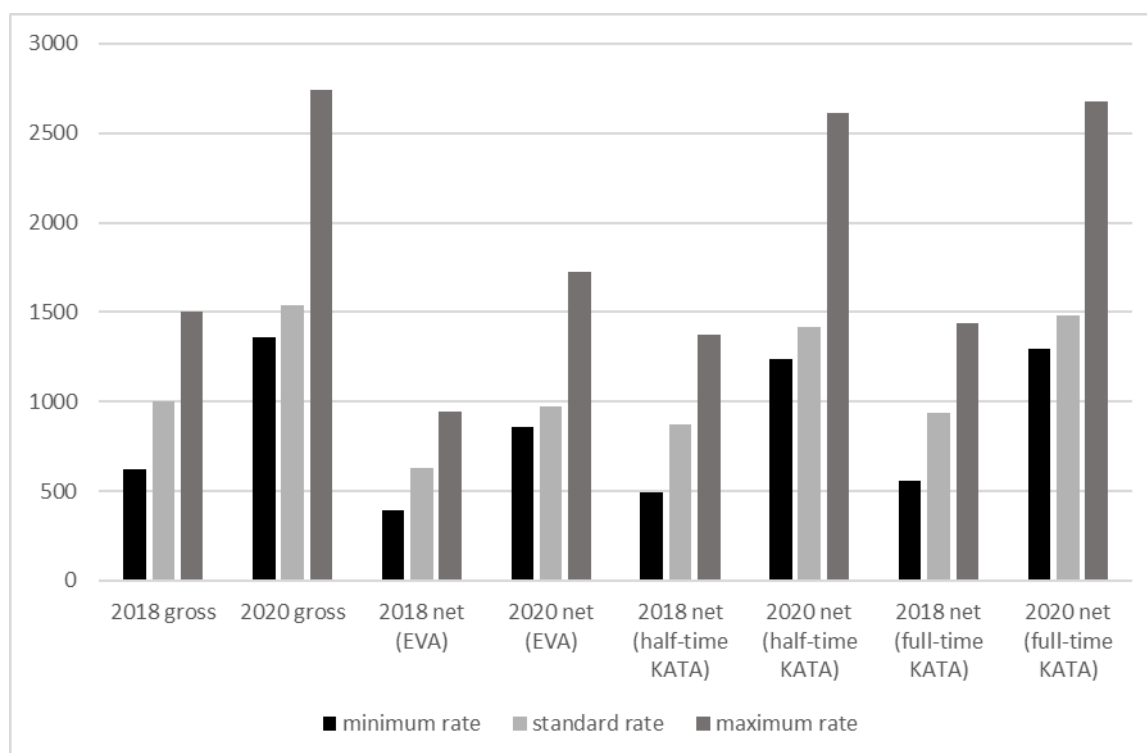
The data suggests a profound inequality in remuneration: literary translation may generate adequate income for a handful of (celebrity) translators, but the majority hardly earns enough to keep body and soul together. They probably have no savings, no reserves, certainly no financial security. If they happen to fall ill and become incapable of work temporarily or permanently, they sink into poverty. This means constant stress, constant anxiety, and very precarious living conditions. Considering that many translators complain on social media that they still have to fight for the standard rate, to no avail in many cases, we can conclude that most Hungarian literary translators must find additional sources of income. Low pay is further exacerbated when payment often arrives 60-90 days after delivery, or even on publication. Some translators are never paid for their work at all.

Of course, the net income will be considerably less (cf. Figure 7). How much so depends on the literary translator's business set-up: they are usually self-employed, or sole traders, limited partnerships, or, rarely, limited liability companies. In Hungary, all citizens are issued a tax identification number at birth, however, those who wish to pursue any kind of economic activity must apply for a tax number from the National Tax and Customs Administration and become authorised to issue invoices for services rendered. In principle, any private person who has a tax number may sign a contract offering translation services. The commissioner, in all likelihood a publisher, deducts public dues from the fee, including personal income tax (15% of the tax base), and social security contribution (18.5%, including superannuation), altogether 33.5% in 2023. The net monthly income was €412.3 in 2018, €904.6 in 2020 with the minimum

rate, €665 in 2018, €1,024.1 in 2020 with standard rate, and €997.5 in 2018, €1,822.1 in 2020 with the maximum rate. (These numbers are just approximations, because the quantity and proportion of taxes and contributions have decreased since 2018, but the exchange rate is now 1 EUR=400 HUF, compared to 1 EUR= 320 HUF in 2018.) However, working with private individuals means an additional 17% payment to the National Tax and Customs Administration compared to working with self-employed contractors and small businesses. It also generates extra administration for the publishers who therefore avoid it whenever possible. The additional cost and administration work as a deterrent.

If the literary translator has any kind of job which already covers public dues, or is a pensioner, they may opt for the so-called simplified contribution to public revenues (EKHO, 15% of the tax base, 9.5% for the pensioners, to be paid quarterly) for the income generated by literary translation up to an annual 60,000,000 HUF (€150,000). This form means less administrative work for the publisher and no extra expenses. The translators have to confirm their choice of this tax-paying form every year. Financially, this is the best choice for hobby translators.

From 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2020, a self-employed literary translator could choose to pay the so-called simplified entrepreneurial tax (EVA) which meant 37% of the tax base up to an annual 24,000,000 HUF (€60,000) income. It was a presumptive tax, the tax-payer had to pay the 37% tax on the invoiced sum within the month the invoice was issued even if payment had not arrived yet. This caused difficulties for translators who often had to wait up to 120 days before being paid, and whose earnings were irregular. Consequently, more and more of them chose to pay the so-called Fixed-Rate Tax of Low Tax-Bracket Enterprises (KATA), a lump sum tax for small enterprises.



**Figure 7.** Gross and net monthly earnings with EVA and (full-time/half-time) KATA in 2018 and 2020<sup>30</sup>

From 1 January 2013 to 31 August 2022, private entrepreneurs and small enterprises could choose KATA up to a yearly 12,000,000 HUF (€30,000) income, which meant paying a monthly

<sup>30</sup> The vertical axis shows the earnings in euros.

50,000 HUF (€125) income tax after full-time, or 25,000 HUF (€62.5) after part-time work, and for pensioners. This fixed amount covered all public dues, except the local business tax. The local business tax (IPA) depends on sales revenue and location, therefore it is usually pretty low for literary translators, approximately the same amount as a monthly KATA payment used to be. If the annual earnings of the KATA taxpayer exceeded the yearly limit (€30,000), verging on the impossible for literary translators, 40% was payable on the excess. This was a very favourable tax regime: altogether 460,000 individual contractors and limited partnerships benefited from it until the government drastically changed its conditions within a week during the tax year. From 1 September 2022, only full-time private entrepreneurs who work for private customers exclusively could opt for this form of taxation.<sup>31</sup> As literary translators almost always work for publishers, they are now ineligible. More than 50,000 private entrepreneurs and limited partnerships went into voluntary liquidation after these changes; it is not known how many literary translators were among them.

After the sudden change, self-employed literary translators mostly opted for flat rate income tax, which is more complicated than KATA. CMS, one of Hungary's biggest law firms, summarised this option—and the potential consequences of this change in taxation—for its clients as follows:

Flat personal income taxation could be an obvious choice for ex-KATA entrepreneurs, but even this type of taxation would mean a significant increase in the tax burden.

Under flat or lump-sum personal income taxation, the tax base equals 60% of the revenue after the deduction of 40% (or 80% and 90% in specific sectors) lump-sum cost on which personal income tax is due. (A tax base up to HUF 1.2 million or EUR 3,000 is tax exempt). Taxpayers are also subject to 18.5% social security contribution and 13% social contribution tax payable on the tax base determined for personal income tax purposes.

[...] Since as many as 460,000 taxpayers have been taxed under KATA in the previous years, most probably the current tax law change will imply price increases in almost all industrial sectors, which could add to the extreme inflation rate experienced these days. Meanwhile, those businesses that cannot absorb the increased tax burden could continue in the grey or black economy. (CMS 2022)<sup>32</sup>

Since the law stipulates a minimum income tax base and a minimum contribution base for private entrepreneurs, literary translators opting for this type of income tax had to advance public dues<sup>33</sup> each month regardless of their actual earnings, changing to quarterly advances in 2023. The monthly payable amount<sup>34</sup> also rose in 2023, since the guaranteed minimum salary for graduates<sup>35</sup> has been raised, and literary translators are supposed to have obtained a college or university degree. This tax regime almost doubles the tax burden (compared to

<sup>31</sup> Except taxi drivers who may receive payment from legal persons as well. 2022. évi XIII. törvény a kisadózó vállalkozók tételes adójáról [Act XIII of 2022 on Fixed-Rate Tax of Low Tax-Bracket Enterprises and on Small Business Tax] was published in the *Official Hungarian Gazette* on July 18, 2022. <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2200013.tv>.

<sup>32</sup> CMS Law-Now™. <https://www.cms-lawnow.com/ealerts/2022/07/hungary-reshapes-kata-small-business-tax-making-many-ineligible>.

<sup>33</sup> It was HUF 86,125 (€215) until 31 December 2022. For the social contribution tax, the calculation base is at least 112.5% of the minimum wage or the guaranteed minimum salary for the minimum contribution. If the tax base exceeds that, the 13% calculation applies.

<sup>34</sup> It rose to HUF 96,857.5 (€242).

<sup>35</sup> It is now HUF 292,400 (€731).



KATA), and may require the services of an accountant, increasing expenses.

Flat-rate taxpayers who have a full-time job get extra benefits on their taxes.

While they remain under the yearly HUF 1.2 million income threshold, they pay neither personal income tax, nor social security contribution, nor social contribution tax (since the amount is exempt from personal income tax, while the minimum contribution is covered by their full-time job).

Once they pass the threshold, they pay taxes only after their actual profits (in contrast to full-time entrepreneurs, who must pay a minimum contribution each month).

(Helpers 2022-2023)<sup>36</sup>

However, only part-time literary translators will benefit from this form: full-time literary translators will probably face difficulties this year. The number of full-time literary translators has fallen steadily since 2000, and this trend will probably accelerate due to this change in taxation, which in turn will presumably reduce the efforts to achieve professionalism and a better social status.

## 6. Other influential factors: the nature of literary translation, the language paradox and the art-craft paradox

In Hungary, approximately 30% of books published every year are translations. Literature has pride of place: more than 60% of publications are classified as children's literature (31.69%, including YA) or fiction (29.32%) in 2019. The data from 2020 and 2021 are also available, but the Hungarian Central Statistical Office changed its methodology (reprints used to be excluded before 2020), therefore they are only partially comparable with the data from previous years. However, we now face a methodological problem: what do we categorise as literary translation? Do philosophy, art history, and academic non-fiction count? Children's literature includes educational books: do they count? The new term 'book translator' does not solve the problem: do comic strips, plays, and television scripts count? The meaning of the term 'literary translation' is taken for granted, but it is constantly evolving: as has been mentioned, it used to exclusively mean translators of poetry, later extending to prose. These days translators of all kinds of non-scientific and non-technical texts are often called literary translators,<sup>37</sup> setting them apart from technical translators. This has apparently led to an increasing number of practitioners, and possibly less prestige for them, which may impact job satisfaction.

The source language may likewise have a certain prestige. The rarer the source language, the fewer commissions a translator is liable to receive, which means that they cannot become full-time professional literary translators and learn the ins and outs of the profession. At the same time, the rarer the source language, the better the translator will be paid for producing a translation from it. Such source languages offer not only better rates, but also better conditions such as deadlines. As a rule, literary translators, including speakers of lesser used languages,

<sup>36</sup> Helpers Finance (August 1, 2022, updated in 2023) <https://helpersfinance.hu/kata-alternative-no-1-for-the-self-employed-flat-rate-taxation/>.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, I was rather surprised when one of our graduates happily informed me that she got her first commission of literary translation which later turned out to be a cookbook (*Greens 24/7* by Jessica Nadel). However, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, publication of 'other belles-lettres' (neither narrative, lyric or dramatic texts) has risen significantly recently (<https://statinfo.ksh.hu/Statinfo/haViewer.jsp>), so the category has probably expanded. Of late, the relationship with machine translation seems to be the boundary between literary and technical translation: in the latter case, practitioners regularly use MT and rely on it to a great extent, while most literary translators find machine translation abhorrent.

form a close-knit community, and help one another to produce the best possible translation. English has been the worst paid source language since 2003, but is estimated to be the source language of 60 percent of the texts translated into Hungarian. Those who translate from English usually get relatively low rates, but have plenty of scope for work. The Hungarian Central Statistical Office reports in their summary of book publishing between 2017 and 2020 that 70% of the published books had a Hungarian author, and more than half of the remaining 30% came from the U.S. (10%), and the U.K. authors (5.1%), other English-language cultures are not listed, therefore 60% of all translations might be underestimated. The dominance of English is indisputable.

Last but not least, the art-craft paradox also highly influences the position of Hungarian literary translators: it is generally believed that only talented, very creative, self-motivated people can do literary translation. However, some assert (Csikai & Kóbor, 2021) that anybody can be taught to do literary translation, just like anybody can translate who speaks a foreign language. These contradictory conjectures probably derive from the fact that the public know nothing of literary translation, and cause the ambivalent judgement of this profession persistent in Hungarian society. If literary translators are so self-motivated that they will do literary translation even if it is poorly paid or unpaid and has little or no regard (Shela-Sheffy, 2008)—can we still regard literary translation as a profession?

## 7. Conclusions

In Hungary, the marginalised and often unacknowledged position of literary translation combined with rapid societal, economic, cultural and technological transformation has led to radical changes within the last twenty years. The customary notion of the literary translator's societal role and importance is, among other things, a consequence of the relatively limited (and often biased) information available to the public on what translation is about and what translators actually do. Translation in general as a profession is surrounded by misconceptions, therefore the (demand for) increasing visibility of the profession may indeed ameliorate the situation.

The worsening socio-economic position of literary translators has led to decreasing professionalism as it is increasingly difficult to earn enough translating literary works full time (already established in e.g., Lőrinszky & Hoch, 2012). Literary translators need a second job, lessening professional pride and potentially weakening skills. Skilled translators are also liable to leave the profession altogether. The income generated by literary translation per unit is lower than potential earnings in comparable creative—let alone other—professions. Considering that literary translation is a rather challenging occupation, which demands much time and effort from practitioners, it is clear that if socio-economic circumstances do not improve, Hungary will have few full-time literary translators in the near future.

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