

## What readers talk about when they talk about translations

Ruth Urbom

*Text Into English Ltd*

---

### **Abstract**

A campaign to draw attention to literary translators' names (in particular, by printing them on the front covers of books) appears to enjoy widespread approval among literary translators on social media and in translators' organisations. But the views of the vast majority of ordinary Anglophone readers appear to have been absent from literary translators' discussions of the issue. This paper investigates readers' attitudes by analysing reviews, posted online by Amazon.co.uk customers, of selected works of translated literary and commercial fiction. Attention is paid to how often readers mention the fact that the book they are commenting on is a translation, what kinds of things they say about translation(s) and how their comments about translation(s) relate to their overall opinion of a book. Analysis of readers' comments about four books in English translation shows a generally inverse relationship between readers' overall opinion of a book and their likelihood of remarking on the translation. Based on these findings, the paper explores possible consequences of efforts to draw more Anglophone readers' attention to the translatedness of books. Suggestions for further research include investigating the priming effects of highlighting a book's translatedness prior to purchase, e.g., on the front cover.

### **Keywords**

literary translation, reviews, reader reception, marketing, Amazon

## 1. Introduction and background

In the twenty-first century, the proportion of books published in the UK and US made up by works translated into English from all the world's other languages has often been estimated at around 3 per cent. The publishing-related blog *Three Percent* (<http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/>), launched in 2007 and focusing on books in translation, takes its name from that figure.

A study commissioned by the organisers of the Man Booker International Prize (as it was then called) reported in 2016 that “translated literary fiction account[ed] for just 3.5% of literary fiction titles published, but 7% of the volume of sales in 2015” (Flood, 2016). When fiction as a whole was considered, translations accounted for 1.5 per cent of the fiction titles published overall. By sales value, those titles represented 5% of total fiction sales.

Six years later, an analysis conducted by *The Bookseller*, the UK's trade magazine for the publishing and bookselling industry, of Nielsen BookScan sales data covering a 52-week period from April 2021 to April 2022 indicated that “translated fiction earned £22.1m (6%) of the overall fiction category's take” (Tivnan, 2022) – an increase of one percentage point from the 2015 figure. Awareness of those single-digit numbers prompted at least one UK-based publisher to say in an interview that “the market [for translated books] is still fairly niche” (Gutteridge, 2022, p. 18).

For the sake of comparison, the German publishing industry body reported that of 63,992 new titles published in 2021, 8,703 (13.6 per cent) were translations from other languages into German. English was by far the dominant source language for translations into German, accounting for 62.6% of translated titles published and far outstripping Japanese and French, the second and third most common source languages, at 10.3 and 10.2% respectively (Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels, n.d.).

Literary translators working into English, dissatisfied with what they perceive as Anglophone publishers' low output of books translated from other languages, have been involved in a variety of efforts aimed at boosting the quantity and profile of books available in English translation. One such measure is a campaign to use the hashtag #namethetranslator on social media.

People use #namethetranslator on social media when citing translators' names themselves, and also to remind or chide others who neglect to include the translator's name when reviewing or tweeting about a translated book. Participants in the #namethetranslator campaign have said that they are seeking “more recognition” (Alter, 2022) and/or “visibility” (Wang *et al.*, 2022) for literary translators. The UK-based Society of Authors, which incorporates the Translators' Association as a division for literary translators, also expresses its support for the Name the Translator campaign on its website.

Name the Translator is an ongoing campaign to ensure the contribution of translators is recognised.

It was started in response to a tendency among reviewers and marketers of translated works to omit the name of the translator, mentioning only the original author. (Society of Authors, n.d.)

The precise meanings of “recognition” and “visibility” as used by campaigners seem difficult to pin down. More recognition *of what* and *by whom*? Visibility *of what* and *to whom*? For example, does being “visible” to readers matter in the same way as being visible to publishers? And are recognition and visibility ends in themselves, or a stepping stone to something else – if so, what?

In 2021, Jennifer Croft, an American literary translator, wrote an impassioned piece in *The Guardian* arguing that translators should be named on book covers alongside source-language authors. One of the reasons Croft gave in support of her argument was that failing to highlight translators' contribution was "bad business" (Croft, 2021). Then, in 2022, Croft took her campaign a step further. She announced that she would no longer agree to translate any book if her name would not appear on the front cover of the published translation (Alter, 2022).

Publishers' responses, as reported in the trade press, varied. Some said they supported Croft's stance and in fact already had a policy of printing the translator's name on the front cover of every translated book they published. A representative of Pan Macmillan UK told *The Bookseller* they would institute such a policy straight away, declaring that "[...] we need to ensure that translators consistently receive the fullest acknowledgement on the book cover and all promotion materials. This will be the position on all new publications and reprints from this week [i.e. mid-October 2021]" (Bayley, 2021). Others, however, expressed resistance to the idea. In many cases, the reasons they gave were economic. They anticipated "difficulties with marketing and sales" (Bayley, 2022) because

[...] some readers might be less likely to take a chance on a book that is packaged as a translation. "There is a possibility that books sell better when they're just presented as good books rather than as 'translated books,'" [Chad] Post [publisher and founder of the *Three Percent* blog] said in an email. (Alter, 2022)

One independent publisher, who did not wish to be named, said: "[...] The front cover is a marketing tool and I, like most publishers, think that how we market our books should be up to us and not dictated by the translator. Selling books is challenging enough as it is." (Bayley, 2022)

Like virtually any business selling products or services, publishers do not use a one-size-fits-all approach for all books in their marketing and publicity efforts.

Through market segmentation, targeting, differentiation and positioning, the company divides the total market into smaller segments, selects segments it can best serve, and decides how it wants to bring value to target consumers in the selected segments. It then designs an integrated marketing mix to produce the response it wants in the target market. The marketing mix consists of product, price, place and promotion decisions (the four Ps). (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p. 59)

Adam Freudenheim, managing director of Pushkin Press in the UK, noted that a book's cover design is part of the marketing effort: "You're making a design decision and you're making a decision about how you're presenting that book to an audience," he was quoted as saying in *The Bookseller* (Bayley, 2021).

Max Porter, the former editor who acquired the English translation rights to the South Korean novel *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang – a book that would go on to win the International Booker Prize for its translation by Deborah Smith – recalled some of the factors the publisher weighed up to maximise the book's chances of "find[ing] readers" in the Anglophone market:

We also spent a longer time than usual discussing the format and cover design for *The Vegetarian*. We wanted it to be affordable and accessible. We wanted to avoid cultural stereotypes or obvious market signifiers of translated fiction. We didn't want the fact it was a Korean novel to carry more weight than the fact it was a staggeringly good novel [...] We talked so much about the copy for the book cover, how we should describe it, what we should and shouldn't say. We did this work for every book but for *The Vegetarian* we felt we

had to get it right, it couldn't disappear, it needed to find readers. It especially needed to find readers who might have felt that translated literature was not for them. (Porter, 2023)

Karen Sullivan, founder of the UK-based independent publisher Orenda Books, described a marketing campaign for a specific book and explained why she had chosen not to mention its translatedness when she sought to secure a high-profile promotion at a mainstream retail chain:

I do feel that there is still reluctance when it comes to reading books in translation [...] and there is still an assumption, in some quarters, that translations will be heavy going or require some formal education to enjoy them. Ultimately, our job is to sell books and, through that, demystify translated literature in general. By making a book look and feel like any other book in its genre, readers are more likely to pick it up and take a chance. When I published Agnes Ravatn's *The Bird Tribunal* (translated by Rosie Hedger), I sold it into key retailers without mentioning the fact that it was Norwegian, including a big WHSmith promotion, which ended up selling thousands of copies. If I'd highlighted the fact that it was in translation, I doubt this would have happened. And thousands of readers picked it up and bought it and were, perhaps, converted! So our strategy is to bring them through the back door, working to demystify translations, while never failing to acknowledge and support our translators. (Gutteridge, 2022, p. 18)

While the literary translators' campaign has focused mainly on the "literary fiction" genre, market research shows that literary fiction accounts for only a small fraction of books read in the UK. Where fiction is concerned, just 23% of respondents to a 2021 UK survey reported having read one or more "classics", and 18% said they had read one or more "contemporary" books in the past year. (Those are the two survey choices that would cover the genre known in the book trade as "literary fiction".) In contrast, 51% of respondents said they had read at least one "drama/thriller" book, and 48% said they had read a book from the "crime" genre – which the survey treated as a different category (Mintel, 2022).

Thus the #namethetranslator campaign's emphasis does not seem to align with the broader reading public's most popular interests and preferences. One explanation for this mismatch could be a phenomenon dubbed *nerdview*, defined as

a simple problem that afflicts us all: people with any kind of technical knowledge of a domain tend to get hopelessly (and unwittingly) stuck in a frame of reference that relates to **their** view of the issue, and **their** trade's technical parlance, not that of the ordinary humans with whom they so signally fail to engage. (Pullum, 2008, emphasis in the original)

A similar sort of bubble was identified in the UK popular music world over 30 years ago:

Just lately there's been some snide criticism of The Scene that Celebrates Itself. Some folks are saying it's growing too incestuous, that such back-slapping support will lead to sycophancy, that honest appraisal will inevitably suffer and that, if they're not too careful, this bright young bunch will become too homogenous, too self-satisfied with preening to the converted. (Sutherland, 1991)

Researchers have found that cultural tastes are "patterned within cultural occupations" and are a factor in "patterns of inequality [...] in the cultural workforce" (Brook *et al.*, 2020, p. 76). As a result of structural inequalities, "[c]ultural workers have attitudes, values and tastes that are very different from those of the rest of the population" (Brook *et al.*, 2018, p. 25).

Some of the UK Amazon reviews analysed for this study mention that the reviewer read the book because it had been chosen by their book club. There are popular book clubs (also called

book groups or reading circles) that have links to TV personalities, such as Oprah Winfrey in the US and Richard and Judy in the UK. Being chosen as a book club title can dramatically boost a book's sales, especially if the book club is a high-profile celebrity-endorsed one. One publicity director in the US noted that “[p]eople who hadn’t read before, people who’d never been in a bookstore before, came in looking for the way to Oprah’s Book Club selection” (Thompson, 2012, p. 275). Similarly, in the UK,

Although Richard and Judy never explicitly stated the selection criteria, it was implicitly understood by publishers that they were looking for books that were neither highbrow literary works nor mass-market commercial fiction but rather – as one manager centrally involved in the Richard and Judy Book Club put it – ‘that middle ground of really good, challenging books’. (Thompson, 2012, p. 276)

It is unlikely that campaigning literary translators fall into the category of “people who’d never been in a bookstore before”. Therefore, to fill in a gap in the discussion, this study set out to obtain some “honest appraisal” from ordinary UK readers of books in translation.

## 2. Methodology

With no resources to conduct a consumer survey of the type done by Mintel, I decided to examine reviews posted by UK readers on Amazon (<https://www.amazon.co.uk>) to find out what they say about translated books.

According to a publishing industry report submitted to a UK Competition & Markets Authority taskforce,

Amazon now controls over 90% of ebook sales and approximately 45% of print books sales (a proportion which is growing), including approximately 70% of online print sales and 92% of audio sales. (Publishers Association, 2020)

Amazon’s market share grew in 2020–21 as consumers increasingly opted for online shopping and ebook downloads during the Covid pandemic (Mintel, 2022).

Because of Amazon’s dominant position in the UK book market, Amazon customers seemed to be the best – and certainly the largest – available existing sample group to serve as a proxy for the country’s book-buying and reading population as a whole.<sup>1</sup> For this project, I chose to look at reviews posted by UK-based Amazon users for four books in English translation:

- *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (2012)
- *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* by Haruki Murakami, translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel (2014)
- *A Long Petal of the Sea* by Isabel Allende, translated from the Spanish by Nick Caistor and Amanda Hopkinson (2020)
- *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson, translated from the Swedish by Rod Bradbury (2012).

In choosing titles to analyse, I looked for books and authors that had achieved significant commercial success in the UK, reasoning that their titles would have accumulated large numbers of reviews – in the hundreds at least – from users. Elena Ferrante and Haruki Murakami ranked among the UK’s “top five translated fiction writers in 2021” (Bookseller, 2022). I also wanted to

<sup>1</sup> Many published studies, representing a variety of fields, have used Amazon users’ reviews as datasets. For example, see Beauchamp (2022) for a study of negative Amazon reviews of scented candles as an indicator of COVID-19 symptoms in the population.

include an equal balance between male and female authors and a geographical range beyond Europe: Isabel Allende hails from Chile, while Haruki Murakami is Japanese. All four authors chosen for analysis have achieved sales in the UK that far outstrip the vast majority of fiction in translation.

According to the cover images and sample previews of inside pages available on Amazon.co.uk, none of these four books mention the name(s) of their translators on the front cover of the print edition. However, all four books do name their respective translator(s) on the title page. The title verso pages of Allende (2020) and Jonasson (2012) indicate that the translators have retained the copyright in their respective English translations, so their names are also listed there. The translation copyright in Ferrante (2012) is held by Europa Editions (the UK publisher of the English translation), though Ann Goldstein is also credited *qua* translator on the title verso page. According to the title verso page in Murakami (2014), copyright in the English translation of that title is held by Haruki Murakami himself. Philip Gabriel's name does not appear on the title verso page in the 2015 Vintage edition available to view on Amazon.co.uk at the time of writing.

The Amazon.co.uk page for each book states the number of ratings the site's users have submitted for that title. An example is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Number of ratings on Amazon.co.uk's page for Allende (2020)

These "ratings" include simple star ratings, as well as reviews posted by users. Each review also incorporates a star rating. Star ratings are made on a scale of one star (lowest) to five stars (highest). The total number of ratings for each book includes ratings submitted by users of Amazon's other localised websites, such as Amazon.com (in the United States), Amazon.de (Germany) and Amazon.in (India). Unlike e.g. Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com>), Amazon does not combine reviews of different language versions of a given title into a single list. Thus the ratings and reviews listed on Amazon.co.uk for Allende (2020) are for the English translation only. The original Spanish edition of Allende's book is listed separately, with a different number of ratings.

Clicking on the number of ratings on the book's main listing page takes the user to a bar chart like that shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Bar chart showing distribution of user reviews at each star level

The first user-submitted reviews are listed nearby. On Amazon.co.uk, they are headed “Top reviews from United Kingdom”. However, clicking on a star rating or a percentage figure on either side of the bar chart shown in Figure 2 takes the user to a subset of the user-submitted reviews, displaying only reviews with that particular star rating. Figure 3 shows the information at the top of the list of five-star ratings for Allende (2020).

The screenshot shows the top of a product page for 'Allende (2020)'. At the top, there are two sections: 'SORT BY' and 'FILTER BY'. Under 'SORT BY', there is a dropdown menu with 'Top reviews' selected. Under 'FILTER BY', there are three dropdown menus: 'All reviewers', '5 star only', and 'Text, image, video'. Below these filters, it says 'FILTERED BY 5 star Clear filter' and '6,462 total ratings, 334 with reviews'. A horizontal line separates this from the review section, which is headed 'From United Kingdom'. The first review is by 'Mrs A J Tanner', who gave a five-star rating and wrote: 'Wow couldn't put it down. Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 17 December 2022. Verified Purchase. Enjoyed this book immensely . Highly recommend. It was a real eye-opener. A bit harrowing at times.'

**Figure 3.** Information presented at the head of the list of five-star reviews of Allende (2020), and one user-submitted review with a five-star rating.

Note that the number of “total ratings” (i.e. including star-only ratings, with no comment-style reviews) is much larger than the number of ratings “with reviews”. In the case of Allende (2020), there are 6,462 five-star ratings overall, of which just 334 include reviews. The figure of 334 includes reviews of the English version of the book from Amazon users all over the world. On Amazon.co.uk, reviews submitted by UK-based users are presented first, grouped under the heading “From United Kingdom”. These are followed by reviews submitted by users elsewhere, under the heading “From other countries”. This study considers only reviews categorised as having been submitted by UK users, which are a subset of the number “with reviews” as indicated in Figure 3.

Starting with the five-star reviews for each selected title and working down the ratings scale, I tallied up the number of UK reviews at each star level. I also recorded how many reviews mentioned the translation or the translator. To do this, I performed a **Ctrl f** search (in a Windows-based browser) for the character string **transl** to find every instance of *translated*, *translation*, *translator* etc on each screen of reviews.

I read each review that mentioned the translation or the translator and allocated each such review to one of three categories, depending on whether the review said something positive (or favourable) about the translation/translator, something negative (or unfavourable), or whether the comment was neutral or ambivalent about the translation/translator. The Results section of this paper contains a more detailed explanation of these classifications.

For each of the four titles I analysed, I ended up with a spreadsheet like that shown in Table 1.

	Total comments	transl. mentions	positive	negative	neutral/ ambivalent
5-star	159	4	4	0	0
4-star	78	9	5	2	2
3-star	43	5	0	3	2
2-star	24	5	0	2	3
1-star	10	0	0	0	0
Total	314	23	9	7	7

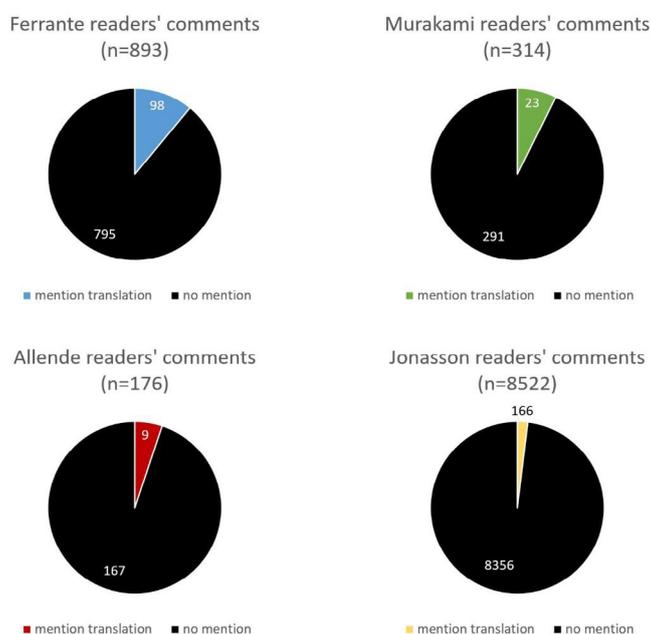
**Table 1.** Results of Amazon UK review analysis for Murakami (2014)

The Amazon reviews for these books were analysed in June 2022. For reasons of time, the four titles presented here are the only ones I examined for this paper.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Proportion of UK Amazon user reviews that mention the translation or translator

Figure 4 shows how many of the reviews posted on Amazon by UK users for each of the four books included in this study were found to mention the translation or translator using the method set out in Section 2.



**Figure 4.** Translation/translator mentions in UK Amazon reviews of Ferrante (2012) (top left), Murakami (2014) (top right), Allende (2020) (bottom left) and Jonasson (2012) (bottom right)

#### 3.2. Proportion of UK Amazon user reviews that mention the translation or translator, by star rating

Figures 5–8 show how many of the reviews posted by UK users on Amazon for each of the four books included in this study mention the translation or translator, broken down by star rating.

Percentages expressing the translation-mentioning reviews as a share of the total number of reviews at each star level are shown to the right of each bar. For example, there were a total of 414 five-star UK reviews of Ferrante (2012). Of those, 24 reviews, or 5.8 per cent, mentioned the translation or translator. The other 390 reviews did not mention the translation or translator.

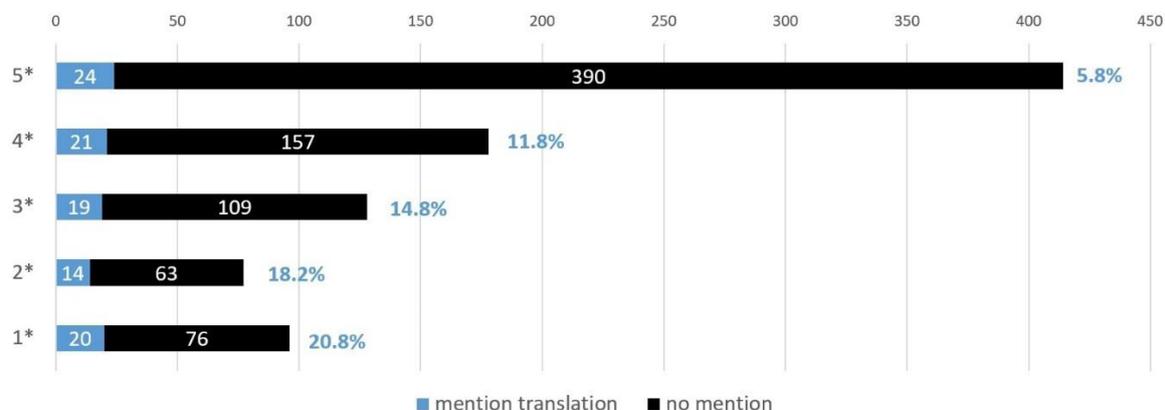


Figure 5. Translation/translator mentions in UK Amazon reviews of Ferrante (2012) by star rating

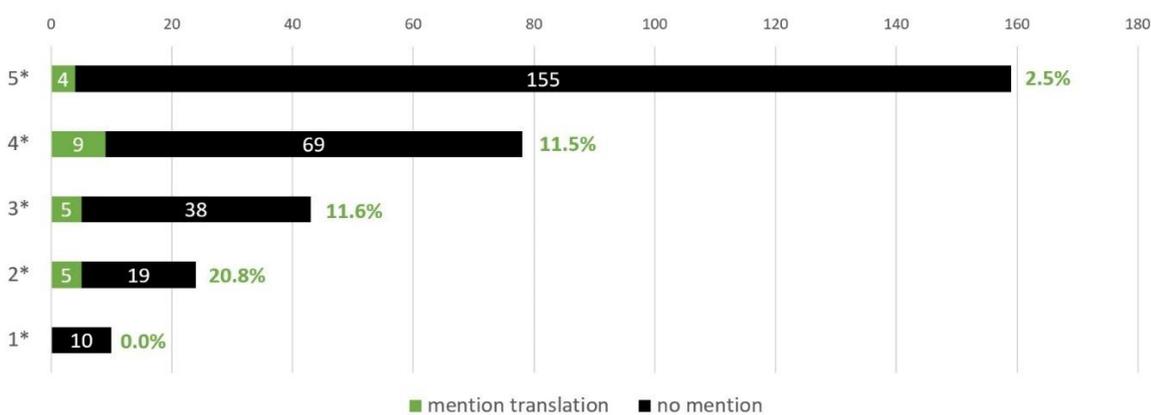


Figure 6. Translation/translator mentions in UK Amazon reviews of Murakami (2014) by star rating

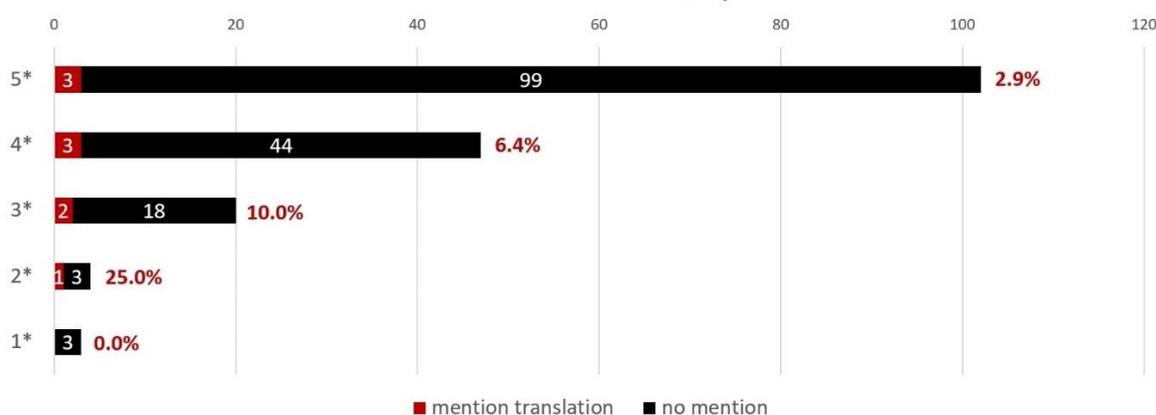
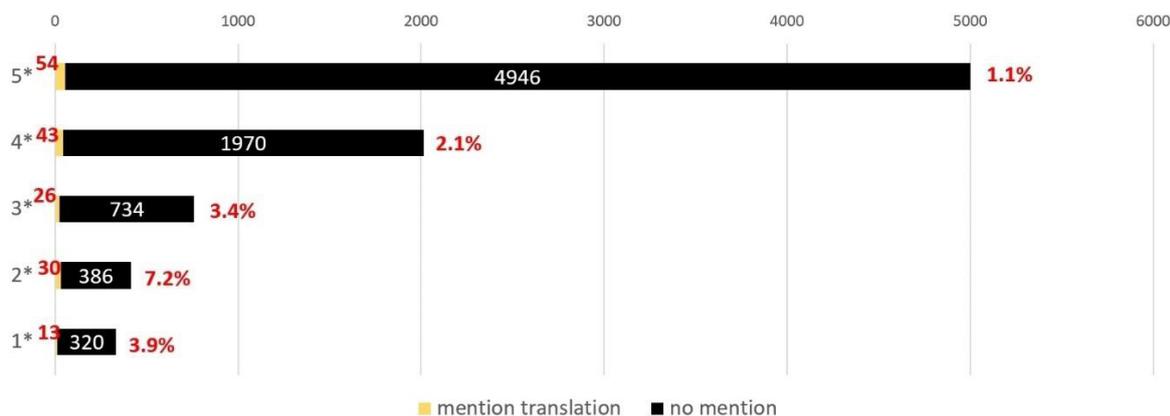


Figure 7. Translation/translator mentions in UK Amazon reviews of Allende (2020) by star rating



**Figure 8.** Translation/translator mentions in UK Amazon reviews of Jonasson (2012) by star rating

Apparently, Amazon.co.uk has a maximum of 5,000 reviews it will display for a given star rating category. After I had clicked through 500 pages of five-star UK reviews of Jonasson (2012) with 10 reviews per page, no “Next page” button appeared at the bottom of the 500th page, even though I had not yet reached the start of the reviews from other countries. Faced with this limitation, I have assumed that the 5,000 five-star UK reviews of Jonasson (2012) I examined are representative of the full set.

### 3.3. Attitudes expressed about the translation or translator in UK Amazon user reviews, by star rating

Figures 9–12 show how many UK Amazon reviews that mentioned the translator or translation did so in positive (or favourable) terms, in negative (or unfavourable) terms, or neither, by star rating. These are subjective assessments.

An example of a mention that I categorised as *positive* is: “It is translated from Italian but you are not aware of this.” (From a five-star UK review of Ferrante [2012].)

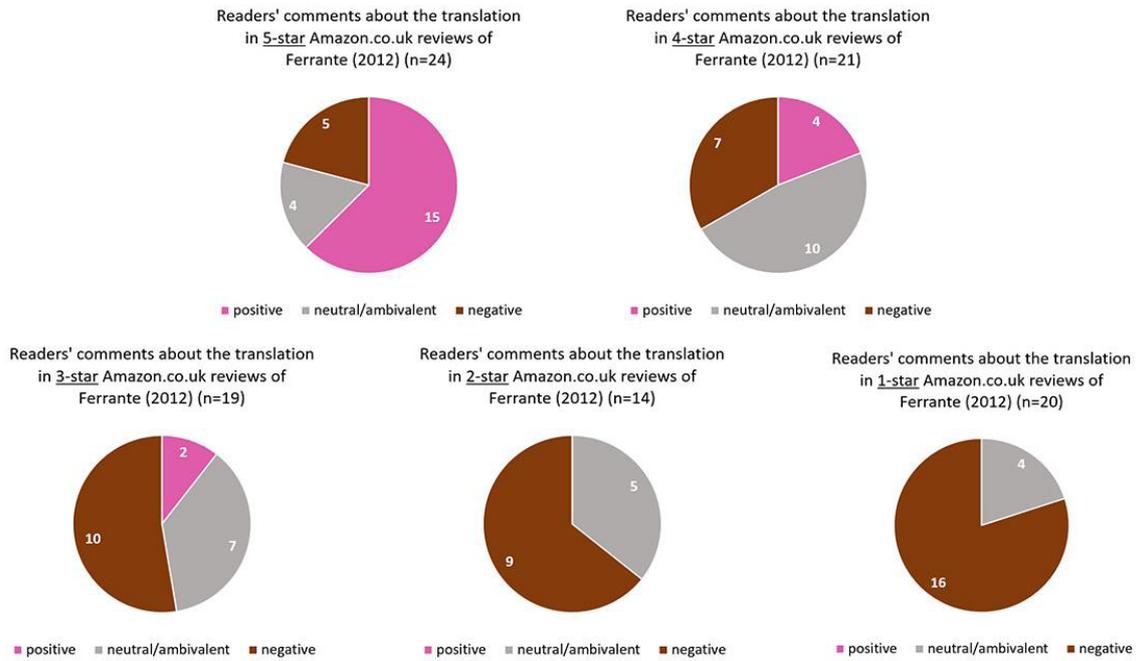
Also from a five-star UK review of Ferrante (2012), an example of a mention that I categorised as *negative* is:

Ferrante’s Neapolitan trilogy is compelling and enchanting. The only problem is the translation which does not do the writer justice. The translator does not seem to be fully literate in English. For example, one mistake she makes repeatedly is to write, “the sky was lighted up” instead of “the sky was lit up”. There are other blatant mistakes. It is a shame that the publisher has not bothered to edit the translation or find another translator who knows English!

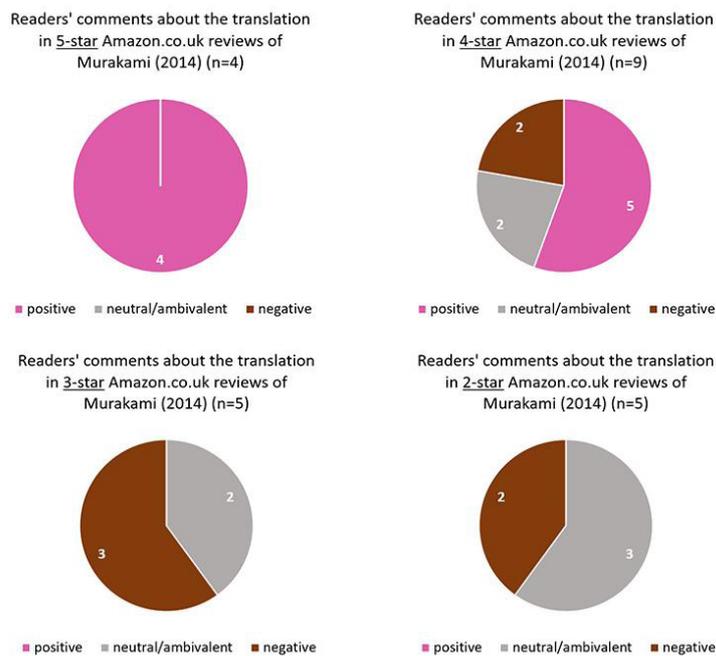
An example of a mention that I put in the third category, also from a five-star UK review of Ferrante (2012), is:

Ferrante’s writing isn’t striking or beautiful on a sentence by sentence level (possibly something to do with the translation) but it is clear, clean and precise.

I classified that as an “ambivalent” mention because the reviewer is unsure whether to attribute her impression of the book’s style to the author or the translator. There are also what I call “neutral” mentions, which merely state the fact that the book is a translation or mention the translator’s name but do not express an opinion about the translation *per se*.

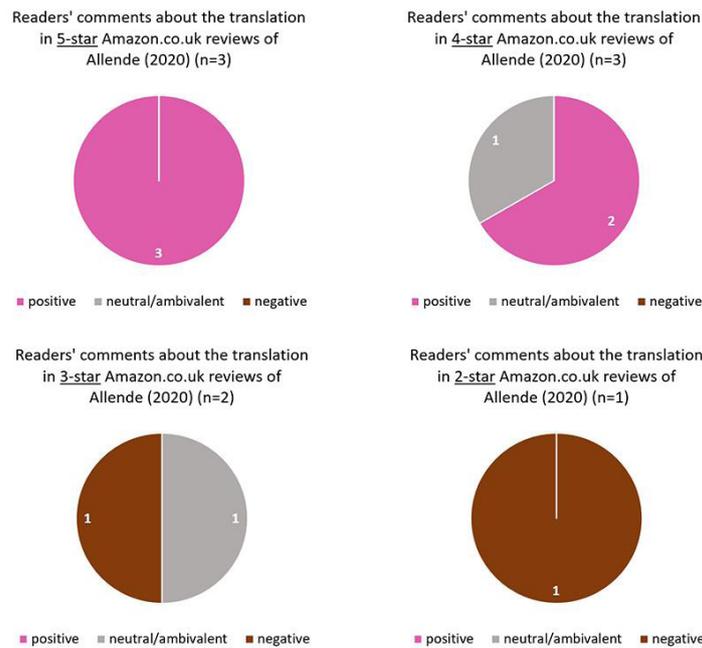


**Figure 9.** UK Amazon reviewers' attitudes expressed towards the translation of Ferrante (2012)



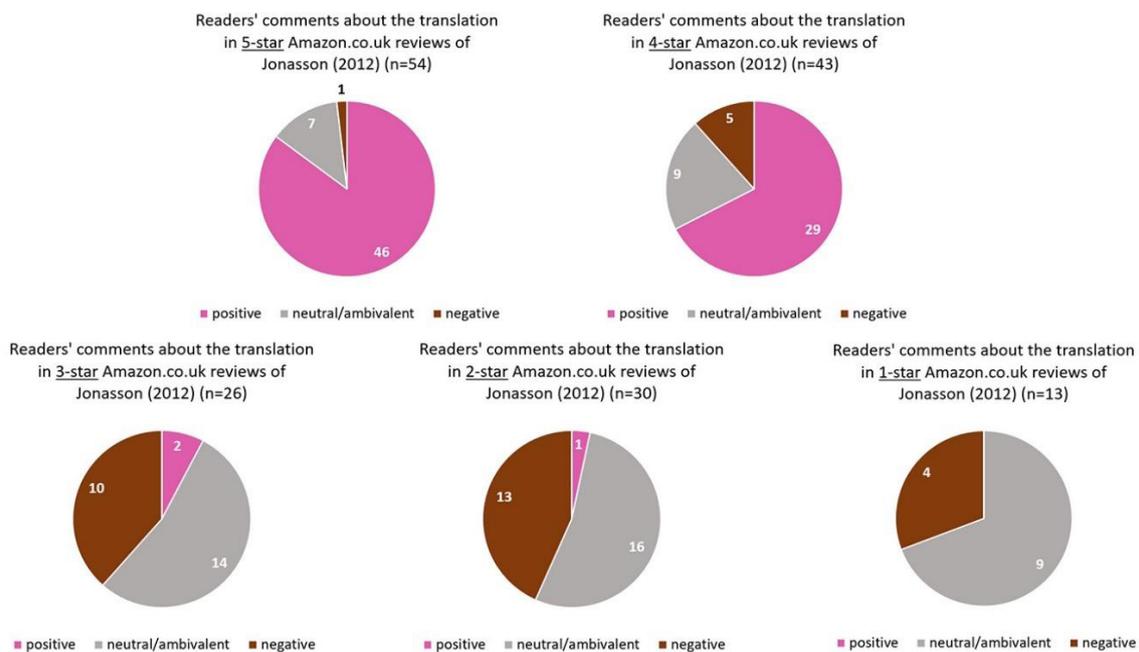
**Figure 10.** UK Amazon reviewers' attitudes expressed towards the translation of Murakami (2014)

There were no UK Amazon reviews of Murakami (2014) at the one-star level that mentioned the translation or the translator.



**Figure 11.** UK Amazon reviewers' attitudes expressed towards the translation of Allende (2020)

There were no UK Amazon reviews of Allende (2020) at the one-star level that mentioned the translation or the translator.



**Figure 12.** UK Amazon reviewers' attitudes expressed towards the translation of Jonasson (2012)

#### 4. Discussion of results

##### 4.1. Observations – quantitative analysis

As Figure 4 shows, only a very small fraction of Amazon reviews posted by UK readers for the four books analysed mention the translation or translator(s) at all.

Ferrante (2012) showed the highest percentage of mentions, with 98 of 893, or nearly 11%, of

UK reviews mentioning the translation or translator in some way. The title with the smallest percentage of reviews mentioning the translation or translator is Jonasson (2012), which is also the title with the largest number of user reviews overall. Of the 8,522 UK reviews I was able to analyse (bearing in mind the 5,000-review limitation mentioned in Section 3.1) for that title, just 166, or 1.9%, mention the translation or translator.

A clear trend emerges in Figures 5–8 for all four titles analysed here as the ratings descend from five stars to two. Across those star levels, the *percentage* of UK reviews mentioning the translation (or translator) *increases* as you go down the rating scale. The percentages of reviews mentioning the translation or translator are summarised in Table 2.

	Ferrante (2012)	Murakami (2014)	Allende (2020)	Jonasson (2012)
5 stars	5.8%	2.5%	2.9%	1.1%
4 stars	11.8%	11.5%	6.4%	2.1%
3 stars	14.8%	11.6%	10.0%	3.4%
2 stars	18.2%	20.8%	25.0%	7.2%
1 star	20.8%	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%

**Table 2.** Percentage of Amazon UK user reviews that mention the translation or translator, by star level

For Ferrante (2012), the trend continues across all five rating levels. The largest percentage of reviews that mention the translator or the translation are found at the one-star level, i.e. the worst possible rating category. For the other three titles in the study, the trend reverses at the one-star level. There were no one-star reviews of Murakami (2014) or Allende (2020) that mentioned the translation or translator(s). Perhaps readers who disliked the books that much did not want to spend much time typing out reasons for their opinion.

In addition to becoming more frequent at lower star ratings (at least down to the two-star level), the overall tenor of comments about the translations tends to become more negative. Even at the five-star level, though, far from all mentions are positive in tone. And as the pie charts in Figures 9–12 indicate, the share of positive comments shrinks as one goes down the scale from five stars to one.

It should be noted that Allende (2020) has amassed far fewer reviews mentioning the translation than the other three titles analysed here. While the Amazon page for that title indicates over 12,000 ratings from readers around the world at the time of writing, only a little over 500 of those ratings include reviews written by users. And of those reviews, just 176 were from UK-based Amazon reviewers at the time the analysis was performed for this study in June 2022. The number of UK user reviews that mentioned the translation or the translators of that title was in the single digits. While the percentages shown in Figure 7 do conform to the trend observed for the other titles in this study, the absolute numbers of UK reviews mentioning the translation at each star level are so low that a difference of just one comment here or there – say, if one of the three-star reviews had been a four-star review instead – would have changed the overall trend. Therefore, having at least several hundred user reviews makes it easier to discern general trends in the data and thus to draw more robust conclusions about readers' opinions in general.

Overall, based on the analysis of the four books considered here, we can conclude:

- The *less favourable* readers' opinion of a translated book, the *more likely* they are to comment on the translation.
- Even if a reader's overall opinion of a translated book is favourable enough to give the book a four- or five-star rating, that is no guarantee their opinion of the *translation* in particular will be favourable.

#### 4.2. Observations – qualitative analysis

As we have seen in the quantitative analysis in Section 4.1, the general tenor of readers' comments about the translation becomes more negative the lower one goes in the star ratings. But *even at the five-star level*, where readers loved the book as a whole, some still have criticisms that they attribute to the translation. A few examples:

- a. The only criticism I have is of the translation the book [*sic*]. I wish I spoke Italian so I could read this directly in Italian, but I am a native Spanish speaker and I found that some of the words the translator used were words which would not make sense in English. For example in one sentence she used the word 'oculist' to mean Optician, I happen to know this as it's a similar word in Spanish, but a native English speaker might not know this. (from a 5-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- b. Really beautiful writing although I had issues with some of the clunky translation letting it down (being bilingual). "taking the part" does not equal "taking someone's place" as just one instance. (from a 5-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- c. I liked the writing style although I recognised that sometimes there could be more words used than needed - just look at the title - but I suppose this is due to the book being translated. (from a 5-star review of Jonasson [2012])

Some comments reveal an undertone of readers' low expectations or poor opinions of translated books in general. In some cases, readers are pleasantly surprised when their preconceptions are subverted. Their comments amount to backhanded compliments.

- d. It is translated from Italian but you are not aware of this. (from a 5-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- e. Though the book has been translated but still it tried it's [*sic*] best to capture the real essence of emotions and love. (from a 5-star review of Allende [2020])
- f. I don't normally care for Swedish authors in translation, but this one is an honourable exception. (from a 5-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- g. I'd recommend it to anyone and don't be put off by the fact it's set in Sweden and translated. (from a 5-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- h. This is a book I found hard to put down, it was unusual, reading it you would never know it was a translation it was so well done. (from a 5-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- i. You wouldn't notice it was translated from Swedish. (from a 5-star review of Jonasson [2012])

In other cases, readers' low expectations have been confirmed. There is an undertone of *Well, it's a translation. What can you expect?*

- j. Very much a translation into English of a book written in another language. The phrasing and vocabulary are different. (from a 3-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- k. This book, being a translation, is stilted and does not flow. (from a 2-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- l. Very repetitive and basic choice of wording. This is obviously a translated book and does not work well in English. (from a 2-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- m. Awful book, badly translated and I wouldn't have bought it if I had known it was a translation. (from a 1-star review of Jonasson [2012])

In examples a–m above, a sense emerges that these readers do not enjoy being conscious of the fact that they are reading a translation.

#### 4.2.1. A special category – the phrase “lost in translation”

While many, if not most, ordinary readers may not be aware of the work that goes into translating a book for publication, there is one phrase that many Amazon reviewers know and use in their reviews. The phrase (along with some variants) is highlighted in the quotes below.

- A. I found the changing names a little confusing, perhaps something was **lost in translation** although by the fourth book I could switch easily. (from a 4-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- B. Quite obviously translated into English and may have **lost** the quality of the prose **in translation**. (from a 4-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- C. I don't know whether something was **lost in translation** but I thought the prose was very flat so that what should've been a page turner just wasn't! (from a 3-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- D. Of course things get **lost in translation** but I found it flat and unengaging. (from a 4-star review of Murakami [2014])
- E. Maybe it's **lost in translation** but this is like a long winded GCSE exam piece made up on the hoof. (from a 2-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- F. Generally a good romp, which **looses** [sic] little for being **translated** from Swedish. (from a 4-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- G. I wonder if the original Swedish is perhaps better and something has perhaps been **lost in translation**? (from a 3-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- H. A pleasant read, a bit slow and I think it was meant to be funny but I think the humour was **lost in translation**. (from a 3-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- I. I believe that this novel was originally written in Swedish, so perhaps something has been **lost in translation**. (from a 2-star review of Jonasson [2012])
- J. I think that this has been **translated** from it's [sic] original Swedish and I think that some essential nuances have been **lost** in doing so. (from a 2-star review of Jonasson [2012])

I classified many of the reviews listed here (A–J) as “neutral/ambivalent” (see Section 3.3, Figures 9–12). In some of these comments, the reviewer expresses dissatisfaction with the book but is unsure of the reason for their dissatisfaction. The familiar phrase “lost in translation” provides a convenient way to suggest a possible reason, with frequent use of hedges such as “perhaps”, “may have”, “maybe”, “I don’t know whether” and so on.

A point to consider, given the widespread familiarity of this phrase, is what effect drawing *more* public attention to the *translatedness* of books would have on ordinary readers’ perceptions of those books, especially prior to purchase.

#### 4.2.2. Another special category – UK readers’ attitudes to US English translations

According to Wikipedia, Ann Goldstein, the translator of Ferrante (2012), and Philip Gabriel, translator of Murakami (2014), are both American (“Ann Goldstein\_[translator]”, 2023 and “Philip Gabriel”, 2022). The Americanness of these two translations attracted a number of UK Amazon reviewers’ ire.

- K. I love this book, but for me it is ruined by the terrible American translation (from a 4-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- L. Incidentally I didn’t give this 5 stars because I found the language, particularly the clunky syntax, problematic. I had to reread sentences quite often in the first hundred or so pages to make sense of them. I did eventually get into the flow of the almost stream-of-consciousness style. Maybe it was the style that was challenging then, or perhaps because I was reading an American translation (although the translator, an editor at the New Yorker, comes with an impeccable pedigree!). All I can say is it put me off initially but not enough to mar the enjoyment of this brilliant novel. (from a 4-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- M. [...] Neither is it the American English, which like the dentists drill you have to suffer in silence and just wince internally every time you stumble over sentences like “How pretty you are, how big you’ve gotten.” No, the bewildering thing to me is how the translator has managed to produce such a choppy and clunky finished piece. Take the example above, surely “haven’t you grown” would be a better choice to “how big you’ve gotten”. And this clunkiness is strewn throughout the book. Sometimes it’s just ham fisted and at others impenetrable and nonsensical. Here are some random examples: [...] And on and on they stream..... The fact that the translator hasn’t lived in Italy and had Italian lessons as an adult may account for some of the choppiness. (Were there really no bi lingual [*sic*] candidates with knowledge of idiomatic Italian?). (from a 3-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- N. The translation is very American so further removes any sense of anything authentic Naples. (from a 2-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- O. Life is too short for this. And the translation is American English. A real waste of time and money. (from a 1-star review of Ferrante [2012])
- P. I only wish we had a British English translation as the Americanisms were quite irritating, although I didn’t let that affect my rating. (from a 4-star review of Murakami [2014])
- Q. If I have one complaint it is about the translation, which was American, and I would have preferred to read an English translation - I am not sure if such a thing

exists, but I do find it jarring sometimes. If I'm reading a book by an American author I accept it as part of the way of speaking and it seems more natural, but when Americanisms are applied to Japanese culture and language it seems ... odd. (from a 4-star review of Murakami [2014])

- R. I found the translation amateurish with bad grammar and constant use of Americanisms such as 'gotten'. I am sure it is better in it's [sic] original language. (from a 3-star review of Murakami [2014])

I did not find any UK Amazon reviews that praised the Americanness of the translation in either Ferrante (2012) or Murakami (2014).

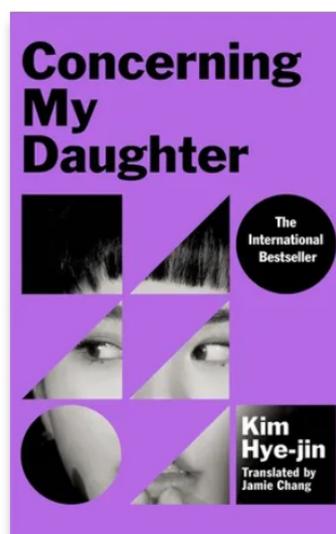
When Murakami (2014) was published in the UK, at least one professional reviewer in a national broadsheet newspaper (namely, *The Guardian*) also criticised the translation for its Americanness (among other reasons).

A reader without Japanese is completely at the mercy of Murakami's translators; when the prose lowers to cliché or commonplace – as it seems to do surprisingly often in this novel – there is no way of knowing if Philip Gabriel is accurately representing his client or letting him down. A further frustration for the British reader is that the publishers here have maintained the spelling and vocabulary of the US edition – “fit”, “gotten”, “sophomore” – which then leads to another culture clash during paragraphs about the significance of the Japanese pronouns and honorifics in use during conversations. (Lawson, 2014)

For publishers, anglicising an American English translation means an extra stage of editing and therefore additional time and expense. Some American English book translations are anglicised for UK publication, but not all.

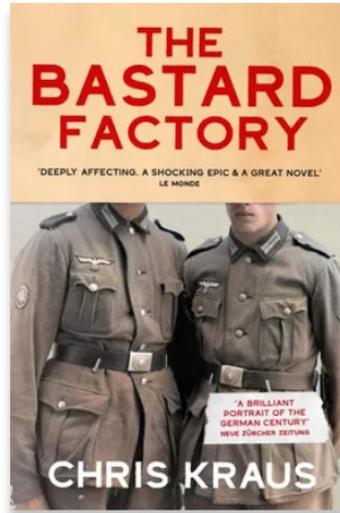
### 5. Words vs deeds – following up on Pan Macmillan's promise

At the time of writing, over fifteen months have passed since an unnamed Pan Macmillan UK employee was quoted in *The Bookseller* vowing that translators would thenceforth “consistently receive the fullest acknowledgement on the book cover and all promotion materials [...] [for] all new publications and reprints” (Bayley, 2021). A webpage highlighting “[t]he best literary fiction titles to read right now” (Pan Macmillan UK, 2023) released by that publisher shows that Kim (2022), released in April 2022 under the publisher's Picador imprint, does indeed include the translator's name on the front cover – see Figure 13.



**Figure 13.** The UK paperback cover of Kim (2022) as shown on PanMacmillan UK (2023).

However, the following Pan Macmillan/Picador titles released from May 2022 onward do not include any translators' names on their front covers as shown on panmacmillan.com and amazon.co.uk: Kawakami (2022a), Kawakami (2022b), Levensohn (2022), Geiger (2022), Kawaguchi (2022), Natsugawa (2022), Petitmangin (2023) and Kraus (2023). Figure 14 shows the UK paperback cover of Kraus (2023) as displayed on the publisher's site.



**Figure 14.** The UK paperback cover of Kraus (2023) as shown on panmacmillan.com .

In the absence of information from the decision makers at Pan Macmillan UK, one can only speculate about the reason(s) for the apparent change in policy concerning translators' names on book covers. The sheer size of Pan Macmillan UK, with its separate departments for editorial, marketing and other functions, might mean that word of the policy decision trumpeted in *The Bookseller* simply did not reach the people in charge of briefing and approving cover designs.

## 6. Suggestions for further research

Analysing Amazon users' reviews of additional translated books would reveal the extent to which the observations made in this paper hold true beyond the four titles discussed here. Crime fiction and certain individual fiction titles that have achieved breakout mainstream sales success – and thus accumulated significant numbers of reader reviews (at least a few hundred) on Amazon.co.uk – seem most suitable for this sort of analysis. Single- or double-digit review counts are too small to draw wider conclusions, because a difference of just one comment here or there would skew the results. With larger numbers of reviews, it becomes easier to discern general tendencies in the comments and draw more robust conclusions about readers' attitudes as a whole.

In light of UK readers' criticisms of the American English translations of Ferrante (2012) and Murakami (2014) observed here, a comparison could be made between UK readers' opinions of literature *translated* into American English on the one hand, and literature set in the same country/countries, but *originally written* in American English, on the other. Does the knowledge that a book is a translation make UK readers more averse to American lexical items, grammar and spellings than they would be with a book written by an American author, even one set in a non-Anglophone country?

An experiment could be set up to investigate the priming effects of seeing a translator's name on the front cover on readers' purchasing decisions and/or their opinions of a translated book. How does such a prominent indication of a book's translatedness influence readers' expectations? Does it evoke suspicion that something will have been "lost in translation"?

## 7. Conclusion

The opinions about translated books expressed by ordinary UK readers in the Amazon.co.uk reviews analysed in this study may come as a surprise to advocates of the #namethetranslator campaign.

Given the frequently unfavourable undertone expressed towards translated books – even in otherwise favourable reviews – and the salience of the phrase “lost in translation” in the public consciousness, campaigners might consider what effect an insistence on drawing attention to a book’s translatedness – particularly at the pre-purchase stage, such as by featuring the translator’s name on the front cover – might have on potential book buyers and readers who do not share campaigners’ accumulated cultural capital, socio-economic background or enthusiasm for translated literature.

Just as marketers employ different strategies and tactics to appeal to different market segments, literary translators might pause to consider the advantages of a more nuanced approach in their campaign for “visibility” and “recognition” that takes account of the tastes and expectations of different audience segments. What works for a poetry chapbook might not be the best way to attract readers to a mass-market thriller or a light novel aimed at the book club market.

Such a nuanced, differentiated approach that acknowledges and ameliorates the effects of cultural workers’ nerdview requires careful thought and does not lend itself to a concise hashtag for social media campaigns.

## 8. References

- Allende, I. (2020). *A long petal of the sea* (N. Caistor and A. Hopkinson, Trans.). Bloomsbury Publishing. (Original work published 2019)
- Alter, A. (2022, February 11). Shining a spotlight on the art of translation. *New York Times*. Retrieved December 26, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/books/literary-translation-translators-jennifer-croft.html>
- Ann Goldstein (translator). (2023, February 27). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/.php?title=\\_Goldstein\\_\(translator\)&oldid=1141993406](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/.php?title=_Goldstein_(translator)&oldid=1141993406)
- Bayley, S. (2021, October 11). Pan Mac to acknowledge translators on covers as campaign support soars. *The Bookseller*. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/pan-mac-acknowledge-translators-book-covers-1282992>
- Bayley, S. (2022, March 23). More industry support needed to properly support translators, publishers say. *The Bookseller*. Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/more-industry-support-needed-to-properly-reward-translators-publishers-say>
- Beauchamp, N. (2022). “This candle has no smell”: Detecting the effect of COVID anosmia on Amazon reviews using Bayesian vector autoregression. In C. Budak, M. Cha & D. Quercia (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 16 (pp. 1363–1367). AAAI Press. Retrieved December 26, 2022, from <https://nickbeauchamp.com/work/beauchamp-candles-ICWSM.pdf>
- Bookseller, The. (2022, January 14). In translation: The top five translated fiction writers in 2021. *The Bookseller*, p. 10.
- Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels (n.d.). *Buchproduktion*. Retrieved March 24, 2023, from <https://www.boersenverein.de/markt-daten/marktforschung/wirtschaftszahlen/buchproduktion/>
- Brook, O., O’Brien, D. & Taylor, M. (2018). *Panic! Social class, taste and inequalities in the creative industries*. Create London. <https://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>
- Brook, O., O’Brien, D. & Taylor, M. (2020). *Culture is bad for you*. Manchester University Press.
- Croft, J. (2021, September 10). Why translators should be named on book covers. *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/10/why-translators-should-be-named-on-book-covers>
- Ferrante, E. (2012). *My brilliant friend* (A. Goldstein, Trans.). Europa Editions. (Original work published 2011)
- Flood, A. (2016, May 9). Translated fiction sells better in the UK than English fiction, research finds. *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books//may//translated-fiction-sells-better-uk-english-fiction-elena-ferrante-haruki-murakami>

- Geiger, A. (2022). *Hinterland* (J. Bulloch, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2019)
- Gutteridge, T. (2022, January–February). Our place in the picture. *ITI Bulletin*, pp. 18–19.
- Jonasson, J. (2012). *The hundred-year-old man who climbed out the window and disappeared* (R. Bradbury, Trans.). Hesperus Press. (Original work published 2009)
- Kawaguchi T. (2022). *Before your memory fades* (G. Trousselot, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2018)
- Kawakami M. (2022a). *All the lovers in the night* (S. Bett and D. Boyd, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2011)
- Kawakami M. (2022b). *Heaven* (S. Bett and D. Boyd, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2009)
- Kim H-j. (2022). *Concerning my daughter* (J. Chang, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2017)
- Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., Harris, L.C. & He, H. (2019). *Principles of Marketing* (8th European ed.). Pearson.
- Kraus, C. (2023). *The Bastard Factory* (R. Martin, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2017)
- Lawson, M. (2014, August 6). Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pilgrimage: Review. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 17, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/06/colorless-tsukuru-tazaki-years-pilgrimage-haruki-murakami-review>
- Levensohn, M. (2022). *A Jewish girl in Paris* (J.L. Searle, Trans.). Macmillan. (Original work published 2018)
- Mintel. (2022). *UK books and e-books market report 2021*. <https://store.mintel.com/report/uk-books-and-e-books-market-report>
- Murakami, H. (2014). *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pilgrimage* (P. Gabriel, Trans.). Harvill Secker. (Original work published 2013)
- Natsukawa, S. (2022). *The cat who saved books* (L. Heal Kawai, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2017)
- Pan Macmillan UK (2023, March 8). *The best literary fiction books to read right now*. <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/best-books-literary-fiction-non-fiction-picador>
- Petitmangin, L. (2023). *What you need from the night* (S. Whiteside, Trans.). Picador. (Original work published 2022)
- Philip Gabriel. (2022, July 4). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/.php?title=\\_Gabriel&oldid=1096439546](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/.php?title=_Gabriel&oldid=1096439546)
- Porter, M. (2023). *Max Porter on publishing The Vegetarian: ‘Everyone agreed that this was an important book’*. Retrieved July 10, 2023, from <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/max-porter-on-publishing-the-vegetarian-by-han-kang-deborah-smith>
- Publishers Association. (2020). Publishers Association response to the Digital Markets Taskforce call for information [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fce1348e90e07562aba0dd2/Publishers\\_Association\\_response\\_to\\_CMA\\_DMT\\_call\\_for\\_evidence\\_FINAL\\_for\\_publication-.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fce1348e90e07562aba0dd2/Publishers_Association_response_to_CMA_DMT_call_for_evidence_FINAL_for_publication-.pdf)
- Pullum, G. K. (2008, June 26). Nerdview. *Language Log*. <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=276>
- Society of Authors. (n.d.). *Credit*. Retrieved December 22, 2022, from <https://www2.societyofauthors.org/where-we-stand/credit/>
- Sutherland, S. (1991, June 8). Moose – Camden Underworld, London. *Melody Maker*, p. 27.
- Thompson, J.B. (2012). *Merchants of culture: The publishing business in the twenty-first century* (2nd ed.). Polity.
- Tivnan, T. (2022, May 13). Translated fiction enjoys golden age as Manga surge boosts sector to record high. *The Bookseller*. Retrieved March 24, 2023, from <https://www.thebookseller.com/features/translated-fiction-enjoys-golden-age-as-manga-surge-boosts-sector-to-record-high>
- Wang, Y., Tobler, S., Hussain, S. & Glastonbury, N. (2022). *What comes after #namethetranslator? Translators and publishers reflect on what still needs to change*. Words Without Borders. <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2022-09/what-comes-after-name-the-translator/>

---

Ruth Urbom

Text Into English Ltd  
 PO Box 7596  
 Bishop's Stortford CM23 2WF  
 United Kingdom  
[contact@textintoenglish.com](mailto:contact@textintoenglish.com)

**Biography:** Ruth Urbom is a Chartered Linguist and Director of Text Into English Ltd.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.