

Reviewing Translated Literature in the United States

A Case Study on Reviews of Translations Published by *The New York Times* in 2022

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Translations are a staple of many national literary scenes around the globe. However, while around 80 percent of all translations published between 2000 and 2009 were from an English original, only around 8 percent of them were into English (Bellos 210). When compared to the American publishing landscape, the central market in the Anglosphere, only about 3 percent of all publications are works in translation, a statistic also known as the Three Percent Problem (Sapiro 242). Many readers and researchers share “the view that reading literature from other countries is vital to maintaining a vibrant book culture and to increasing the exchange of ideas among cultures” (“About Three Percent”).

The eponymous Three Percent website, a resource for international literature by the University of Rochester, laments that only a fraction of the translations that make it to publication in the United States are covered by the media and thus often do not find an audience (“About Three Percent”). One of the ways traditional media can bring

attention to new releases and translations is via book reviews, which serve a double function of selling books by making them known to their audience and judging their literary quality to provide cultural guidance on what might be considered good literature (Squires 118). Therefore, they “can set the agenda for books opening their pathway to critical success” (121), which is often followed by commercial success.

In a 2004 study on the effect of reviews on fiction titles in *The New York Times* on sales numbers, researchers found that all reviews have a positive and statistically significant impact on sales data. Positive reviews lead to a high increase in sales at 62.9 percent in the week following the review’s publication, compared to negative reviews that still lead to an increase of 34.4 percent. This suggests that the informative aspect of reviews is just as important as the persuasive effect of conveying one’s perception of value (Sorenson and Rasmussen 3) and that merely being chosen to be reviewed in the newspaper already constitutes good publicity even

if the reviewer takes a more critical stance (5).

In the case of translations, book reviews fulfil the same role of introducing readers to new titles and passing judgment on whether they are worth the read (Kemppanen 148). They can also go one step further by drawing connections between the cultural contexts of the originating community and the one it is translated and brought into. Therefore, Kemppanen argues the “analysis of book reviews is a means of studying the reception of translations in a given culture” (Kemppanen 145).

The US publishing industry tends to have less interest in publishing translations, which is accredited to a multitude of reasons, from the lack of multilingual editors and high costs to the difficulties of bridging the gap between two different cultures and a more critical view towards the quality of translated works when compared to native forms of writing (Sapiro 434). Translations have a reputation of not selling well in the Anglophone world (Vanderauwera 202). As Maczka and

Stock found, some books might not even be marked as translations by the publisher to avoid that sort of pre-judgment based on the title's status as translated literature (Maczka and Stock 50). If reviewers take the work's potential popularity into account when choosing what books to review (Sorenson and Rasmussen 2), this might explain the relatively small number of reviews on translations.

When works in translation are reviewed, they usually appear in trade journals and a case study on translations from Dutch found that they tend to get more coverage in European publications rather than their US equivalents (Vanderauwera 200). In 2004, *Publishers Weekly* reported that about 60 percent of all books in translation are submitted for review and that those works accounted for around 2 to 3 percent of all books reviewed that year, with most titles originating from French, German, Spanish, and Italian, as well as Japanese (Maczka and Stock 50). That same year Schulte pointed out that even though *The New York Times Book Review's* 100th-anniversary publication in 1996 had only featured seven foreign authors, not much had changed since then regarding the coverage of translations in the paper.

In the aforementioned Dutch context, reviews of translations are mostly superficial and mentions of the original literary culture they originated in are based on the publisher's information (Vanderauwera 200). While the value judgment of those translations is mostly similar to that of English-original works, reviewers focus on the readability of the text with a high sensitivity to deviations from standard English (202).

Generally, reviewers of international literature in the US seem to have little interest in the books' national origins even when reviewing books from other anglophone markets. Instead, they focus on genre and author profile (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 252, 254), a move that even translator and translation reviewer Daniel Hahn mirrors: he points out that he often

does not mention the translator in the limited space of a review as he argues it is not as important as comments on the work's author, plot, characters, or arguments (Hahn).

In the last few years, however, translators have been pushing for more visibility. In a recent open letter translator Jennifer Croft petitions for the inclusion of translators' names on book covers, gaining the support of over 2,600 signatories including several well-known writers and translators (Alter). When it comes to reviews of translations, translators have been expressing their wishes for what they should include as early as 1982: Christ argues that the translator should be identified in the credit listing accompanying the review and should also be acknowledged within the body of the review. Lastly, a review of a translation should include some evaluation of its quality (Christ 22).

This paper looks at reviews of translations published by *The New York Times* in 2022 to allow for a closer look at contemporary reviewing practices for foreign literature. Whereas most studies researching how translations are reviewed originated in the early 2000s, reviews tend to focus on new releases, sometimes even pre-publication (Squires 118), therefore they suit themselves to be studied as representatives of the publishing activities within the same timeframe. This is why I chose to focus on one year.

Drawing on data from the translation database, an offshoot of the Three Percent website that has since been incorporated by *Publishers Weekly* ("Welcome to the Translation Database"), the aims of this analysis are to on the one hand shine a light on how the translations covered by the newspaper represent the overall publishing landscape of translations in the United States but to, on the other hand, also allow a glimpse into how those books are reviewed, i.e., whether these practices align with Christ's criteria of translator visibility and include an evaluation of the translation.

The New York Times (hereafter the *NYT*) in particular was chosen not only because of the large audience (its *Sunday Book Review* publication has a circulation of around 1.5 million), but also because the paper "holds a position of power to make a difference beyond the visibility of writers and books" (Bateman), illustrating how featuring translations might not only bring about a chance for that particular book but for reviewing practices for foreign literature overall. Additionally, the *NYT* has in the past been criticised for its lack of diversity in not only featured authors and reviewers but also in which publishers the newspaper reviews (Bateman). This makes the question as to how accurately the medium portrays the translation landscape through their selection of titles to review even more poignant.

To identify reviews of translations published by the *NYT* last year, I used the search function of the newspaper's website with the following search parameters: date between January 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022, section:books and type:articles, in addition to the keyword:translation. For an overview of publishing data on translations, I used *Publishers Weekly's* translation database, which collects information on translations that appear in English for the first time and that are distributed in the US via conventional means ("Welcome to the Translation Database"). Overall, this analysis covers 149 articles and 447 translations published in 2022.

Representing the Translation Publishing Sphere in the US

Out of the 447 translations published in 2022, about 34 percent or 150 publications were reviewed in the *NYT* that same year. Comparing the genres of the recorded translations and the ones reviewed by the newspaper, fiction makes up around two-thirds of translations in both cases. While nonfiction ranks second when it comes to overall translations with 17 percent, in the *NYT* children's books take its place with 15.3 percent (up from 9) of translations while nonfiction's stake is

lowered to 14.6 percent. Poetry remains the least common genre at around 3 percent.

Looking at the origins of the translations published in 2022, 38 source languages were recorded in the database whereas the *NYT* reviews spanned 27 languages. Most of the eleven source languages not represented by the publication, such as Afrikaans, Estonian or Vietnamese only appeared in one translation each, so this omission does not have a large impact on the overall representativeness of the newspaper sample. Hebrew, however, stands out in this context as the language made up almost 2 percent of all translations recorded with six published titles in 2022, none of which received a review.

Additionally, some source languages were reviewed but comparatively less than one would expect based on overall translation data. Particularly Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish as well as Russian received fewer reviews when compared to their overall stake in the publishing landscape. The most glaring underrepresentation, however, was Catalan with only 11 percent of translations sourced from that language being reviewed.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few source languages were reviewed more often than the mathematical mean of around 34 percent. Belarussian, Turkish, Japanese, and Korean stood out in particular as more than 60 percent of translations from those languages were covered by the newspaper, which makes the last three twice as present in reviews as in overall translated publications. Greek, Ukrainian, and Romanian saw half of

their translations being covered and translations from Danish, French and Hungarian also had a slightly higher chance to be reviewed than the statistical average. A likely cause for the focus on Ukrainian and Belarussian translations, and the lack of reviews on Russian ones, is the war in Ukraine as many of the titles from the former two languages focused on the ongoing conflict.¹

Looking at the overall most translated languages in comparison to the most reviewed languages there are some slight differences. Spanish and French source texts represent the top two in both most translated and most reviewed, French taking the lead at

For many world languages like French, Russian and Portuguese translations from the respective countries of origin were more likely to be reviewed than those from former colonies like Brazil, African countries, or Kazakhstan.

18.7 percent of reviewed translations and Spanish at 17.3 percent. In the *NYT* the third most common source language is Japanese with 12.7 percent, so the Asian language switches places with German, which made up around 7 percent in both databases. Italian remains the fifth-most translated and reviewed language with around 6 percent.

In total, 64 different countries were recorded with 38 being represented in the *NYT*. For many world languages like French, Russian and Portuguese translations from the respective countries of origin were more likely to be reviewed than those from former colonies like Brazil, African countries, or Kazakhstan. Lastly, the variety of national origin for translations from Spanish to English is not fully reflected in the reviews published by the *NYT*. The newspaper only reviewed books from five out of eleven countries. Together with the slight underrepresentation of translations from Spanish overall, this case highlights an area of improvement for the *NYT* when it comes to accurately representing the translation publication landscape.

How Translations are Reviewed in *The New York Times*

The 149 articles on translations covered 150 translations with a total of 184 mentions of those translations. Only about half of the reviews covered solely one book while the other half rounded up multiple books, usually by genre or release date. Overall, roundups covered a total of 108 out of the 184 mentions. However, five reviews covered multiple books in a series or by the same author.

Twenty-one articles did not state a reviewer's name. The remaining 128 reviews were written by 96 unique reviewers. Four reviews were written by more than one reviewer, all four of them were seasonal wrap-ups published in March and September. Fifty-five percent of reviewers were female and 45 percent were male, and output-wise 60 percent of reviews were written by women. For most of the reviewers

¹ See for example the review of a biography of the Ukrainian president Zelensky in "Newly Published, From Joseph Smith to Salmon Farms," *The New York Times*, 13 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/books/review/new-this-week.html>.

publishing multiple reviews on translation in 2022 like Joumana Khatib, Molly Young and Sarah Weinman, their frequent features can be explained by their permanent editorial positions at the magazine whereas many other reviewers work on a freelance basis.

Twenty-one books received two different reviews in the *NYT*, usually a standalone review and a mention in a roundup. There were, however, a few exceptions to this rule: Peter Handke's *Aftermath* received two standalone reviews, one in the NY Edition (Szalai) and one in the *Sunday Book Review* (Fritzsche). Five books received three reviews in total, including Tove Ditlevsen. Lastly, *Yoga* by French writer Emmanuel Carrère garnered two standalone reviews and two mentions in roundups, making his work the most reviewed translation in the *NYT* in 2022. When it comes to books that received more than two reviews, their writers are mostly high-profile authors with two Noble laureates and winners of other prestigious literary awards. At least in this category the long-held belief that the *NYT* is more likely to review works by well-known authors is confirmed.

Only 27 out of the 184 reviews had an evaluative character regarding the book in question, with the majority informing the readers on the plot, message and writing style without passing judgement on its quality. Eighty-two percent of those evaluations were positive, with only five reviews taking a negative stance on the reviewed material.

Only one of the 86 reviews that did not mention the translator commented on the quality of the translation. As this review was part of a roundup with short individual text for each featured book, this was a rare example that still chose to comment on the translation itself even though it was only with one adjective ("Newly Published Poetry"). Out of the 98 reviews that did mention the translator in the body of the text around 40 percent did not evaluate the translation. About 35 percent of

reviews mentioning the translator gave at least a brief evaluation of the translation and 26 percent gave a more detailed review of the translation itself. Reviews that evaluated both the book and the translations were more likely to give detailed feedback at 50 percent than purely informative reviews.

Unsurprisingly, standalone reviews were the most likely to comment on the quality of translation, with 33 percent briefly commenting and 36 percent giving more elaborate feedback. In comparison, 51 percent of roundups did not evaluate the translation at all and only 12 percent went into more detail in their evaluation. Genre-wise, reviews in the Roving Eye category were most likely to include a more elaborate translation evaluation with two out of four reviews giving detailed feedback. Fiction reviews were similarly elaborate with 45 percent commenting more extensively on the translator's work. Only a third of fiction reviews did not receive any kind of comment on the translation. Similarly, 20 percent of picture book reviews included a more in-depth evaluation of the translation, whereas non-fiction titles did not receive any evaluations of the translation, as the reviews focused on the subject matter and its presentation rather than the writing craft behind them.

Out of the 35 reviews that only included a brief comment on the translation, 19 mainly commented on the translator's capabilities or the translation overall with wording ranging from "sensitive" (Garner) and "nimble translated" (Newly Published Poetry) to "sparkling" (Tepper), and "gorgeously translated" (Illingworth). Seventeen percent of reviews concerned the visibility of the translator with comments covering the perceived subtlety (Tepper) or seamlessness (Walsh) of the translation. Five reviews positively remarked on the flow of the translations and three reviews focused on the language used by the translator, with comments like "simple, stark and often luminous English" (Boyagoda) while the third one commented that

the translation was both "much needed and clear" (Radjy). One reviewer commented that they were not sure if the translator was the one to be credited for the beautiful writing (Young) and another one excused the writing style by saying that the translator could not be blamed for it (Gates).

For reviews that evaluated the translation in more detail, 56 percent of the 25 reviews in this category focused on how well the English rendition matched the original, whereas five of them went into the intricacies of the translation in question. One example fell in the middle between those two by commenting that the translation is very readable but also by stressing how the multilingual environment of the original is preserved in the translation through the incorporation of dialects (Rojas). The more detailed comments range from discussing the merits of choosing a single word's translation to the non-domestication of certain foreign terms or idioms.

Three reviews also focused on specific examples of how the reader profits from reading the work in translation by pointing out that the reading experience is aided by the translator's writing style. The most detailed of this review category, Lily Meyer's review of *The Pachinko Parlor*, explains that "Higgins manages to call the reader's attention to both the beauty of Dusapin's writing and the linguistic and cultural switching that demands so much of Claire's energy," (Meyer) combining their praise with an evaluation of the intricacies of the translation process.

While most of these evaluations are positive, three reviews criticised the translation. One reviewer merely states that the translation veered too colloquial at times (Wang), the other reviewers further elaborate on what they did not like. Alexandra Jacobs points out that while the translation flows smoothly overall, two choices of how certain words were translated were criticised as being too American for the French spirit conveyed by the author

(Jacobs). Commenting on a translation of a text that frequently switches between Belarussian and Russian, whose link the translators tried to mimic by mixing English and Scots, Sophie Pinkham states that this flipped the implied cultural relations between the two languages for easier readability, muddling the novel's message (Pinkham). This criticism is especially poignant as her overall evaluation of the novel is positive and thus the only example where the evaluation of the novel and the translation differ.

Conclusion

While the selection of works in translation featured in reviews by the *NYT* is not fully accurate when compared to the overall translation landscape in 2022, most of the deviations are relatively moderate. An overall trend that can be observed is the tendency away from nonfiction skewing more heavily towards fiction, with children's books, in particular, being overrepresented in the newspaper.

Looking at languages and countries of origin French, Spanish and German are very present in both the industry and the reviews though Japanese and Korean literature is featured more heavily in the *NYT*. Except for Spanish and Chinese, languages spoken in multiple countries are still featured mainly from the original colonising nation. Two outliers when it comes to diversity in book reviewing are author and translator genders, which leaned heavily towards females and in the case of authors even flipped the gender distribution compared to the overall translation data.

Only 27 reviews evaluated the novel overall and those that did were also more likely to evaluate the quality of the translation, which a total of 60 reviews did. Most works of fiction received an evaluation, and it was mostly standalone reviews that commented on the translation compared to roundups. Short comments usually focused on the translator's capabilities or their visibility in the writing, whereas more detailed

feedback mostly zeroed in on the match between the original version and the English rendition followed by critiques of specific translation choices. So, while the *NYT* is making steps in the right direction particularly when it comes to translator visibility, there is still room for improvement.

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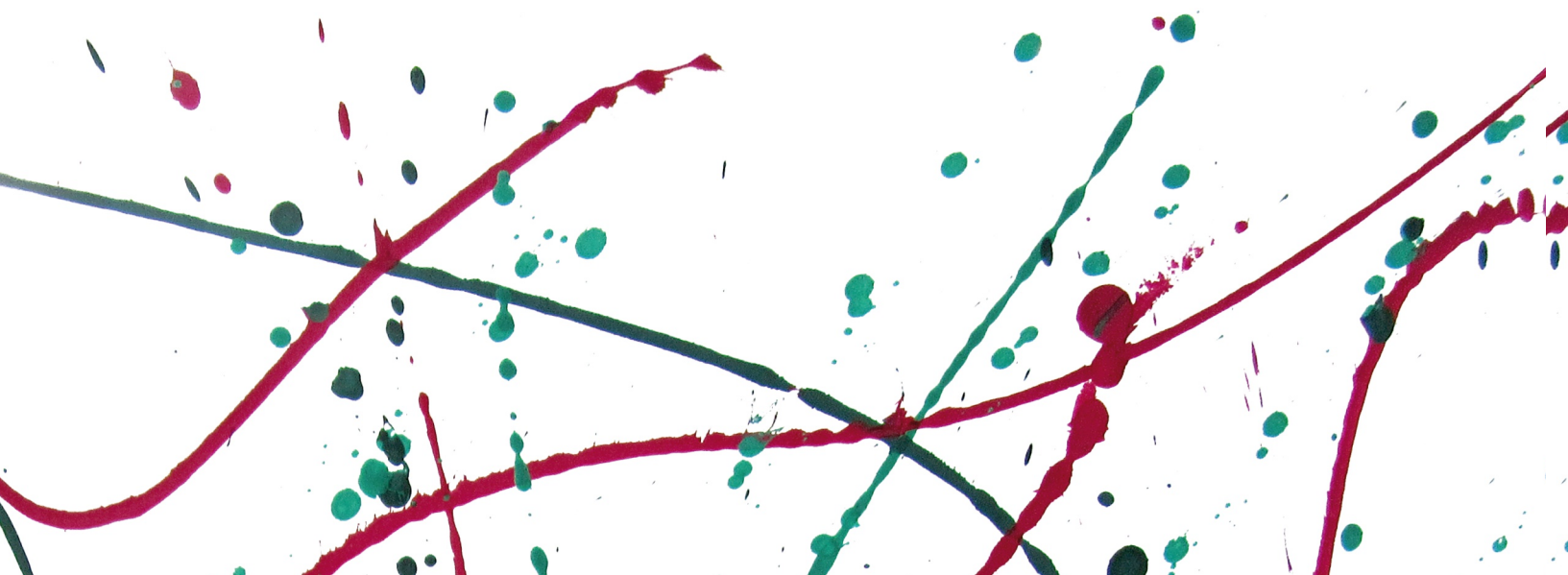
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