

On selected aspects of the literary translation profession in Slovakia

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Abstract

In Slovakia, it has been said that the working conditions of literary translators have long been critical. Surprisingly enough, the profession has long not been surveyed to a large enough extent so that such claims could be properly evaluated. The aim of this study is to outline the core sociological issues pertinent to the profession and bring data that would not only enrich the theoretical underpinnings of Slovak translation sociology but perhaps even help the profession to more effectively fight for greater status.

The first part of the study presents the result of a sociological survey of the literary translation profession in Slovakia which was conducted in 2019. In this study, the profile of the Slovak literary translator and their working conditions are discussed. In the second part of the study, the data from the survey are viewed in light of relevant factors affecting the profession in Slovakia, including the roles of training institutions, activities of professional associations, and the state of popularizing translation criticism, and discussed in relation to Tseng's (1992) model of professionalization with the aim of gauging the level of professionalization of Slovak literary translators and predicting its future development.

In small countries with smaller populations, translated literature often plays a more central role in the literary system and occupies a majority proportion of titles¹ on the book market (see Even-Zohar 2000 [1978/1990]). This has also been the case of Slovakia.² In this country

¹ By "titles" I mean books aimed at the general public, distributed through the usual book distribution channels. In 2017/2018, Ikar, one of the largest publishing houses in Slovakia, reported that 63.9% of all their published titles were translations. If we were to take into account various ad hoc and occasional publications (produced by municipalities or institutions), scientific works published at universities, and all other publications aimed at specialized audiences (and primarily not made available to the public at large), books in Slovak would dominate the charts. See *Knižný trh 2018*. If we were to take into account only fiction, the ratio would be even more in favor of translated literature.

² The correlation between how much the given language is spoken and the proportion of translated literature was proved as statistically significant also in the CEATL (2007/2008) survey. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the proportion of translated literature was the highest among all of the surveyed 28 countries and regions. It stood at 80%. This was unlike in the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, where the proportion was less than 10%.

translated literature has had a major influence on the cultivation of language standards, and, through its developmental function, it has also impacted the literature written in Slovak (Bednárová 1994)³. Therefore, it could be argued that in Slovakia, like in other smaller cultural environments, literary translators are among the most prominent agents of culture. Logically enough, the quality of translated literature is dependent on their working conditions. The aim of this study is to discuss the said conditions on the basis of a sociological survey of selected aspects of the literary translation profession in Slovakia and evaluate the state of professionalization in light of Tseng's (1992) model of professionalization.

1 Survey design

The survey (henceforth as DoSlov 2019) was conducted in 2019 by the civic association DoSlov⁴. The survey is the first in Slovakia to cover such a breadth of topics and areas of interest. The last notable survey of the literary translation profession was conducted in 2015 by the Slovak Association of Literary Translators (SSPUL) as part of the Europe-wide CEATL survey (published in 2007/2008⁵). Apart from this, there have been two general surveys by the translation market at large (Djovčoš 2010 and Djovčoš 2015).⁶

³ Deep and intricate interconnections between translated and Slovak literature and the crucial impact of translation on the intellectual formation of Slovak culture in the 20th century have been documented in the 2-volume Dictionary of Slovak Literary Translators of the 20th century (2015, 2017).

⁴ The DoSlov 2019 survey was designed by the association's executive board lead by Barbara Sigmundová.

⁵ Unlike DoSlov 2019, the CEATL survey did not cover the profile of the translators (age, educational background, number of published translations, working languages, etc.), their working conditions and the respondents' satisfaction with them, nor did it cover whether translators applied for literary translation grants. Yet, since this was a Europe-wide survey, it could offer insights into broader issues. Therefore, it can help us better understand the overall dynamics of the profession in Europe, and such data is important to better explain and contextualize local findings.

⁶ In the survey, however, Djovčoš did not devote any question to book translations produced by publishing houses specifically (which was the topic of DoSlov 2019). When asked about "specialization", respondents could choose between "literary translation", "non-literary translation" (odborný preklad in the original, a term which has proved notoriously difficult to appropriately translate into English) or "both". Since other research has shown that in Slovakia even translators of subtitles or dialogue lists for dubbing view themselves as literary translators (see Rondzиковá 2019), and it could be argued that even commercial translation (done for agencies) can be literary, the findings from the

A web survey was used to collect the data. It was available from April to June 2019 and distributed via online translators' forums (mostly on social networks) and translators' associations. The translators active in these spaces were also asked to refer their colleagues who might not be as active online or in the said association back to the survey.

The survey was designed to focus on three areas:

1. the profile of Slovak literary translator (age, educational background, income from literary translation as a proportion of their total income, years spent in the field, number of translations)
2. work conditions on their last book translation (basic information on the translated book – source language, genre, length, etc., as well as terms of their contract – deadline, rates, etc.)
3. overall translator's satisfaction with their work conditions and their knowledge of the literary translation market (membership in professional associations, applying for grants, etc.)

2 Sample overview

The survey was aimed at literary translators who had at least one book translation published at the time. Altogether 117 respondents participated in it.

Given the size of the Slovak market, this sample can be viewed as by and large representative.⁷ Translators of various ages participated in the survey, from translators in their twenties to 70 year olds (see Fig. 1). The cohorts of 30–39 and 40–49 year olds had the largest representations. The biggest number of what could be deemed as established professionals, i.e. translators who have had at least 10 book translations published, also fell into the said cohorts. The sample was also varied in regard to experience in the field. While there were translators just starting out in the field, who had translated only a small number of books, the oldest respondents had translated dozens of publications (see Fig. 3).

DoSlov survey are not fully comparable with the said surveys conducted by Djovčoš.

⁷ Since the exact size of the population of translators in Slovakia has not been determined so far, it is thus difficult to gauge how representative the sample of literary translators is. In the European survey CEATL (2007/2008), it is stated that, in 2005/2006, 500 literary translators were active in Slovakia. Even though the research from 2005/2006 can be seen as dated, it could be argued that since the annual number of published translations has not changed very much over the years (see the reports on the Slovak book market in the References), the number of active literary translator might not have changed that much as well. An important caveat has to be pointed out, though. While the CEATL survey only looked at translations of fiction, the DoSlov survey looked at book translations produced by publishing houses at large (see Fig. 4).

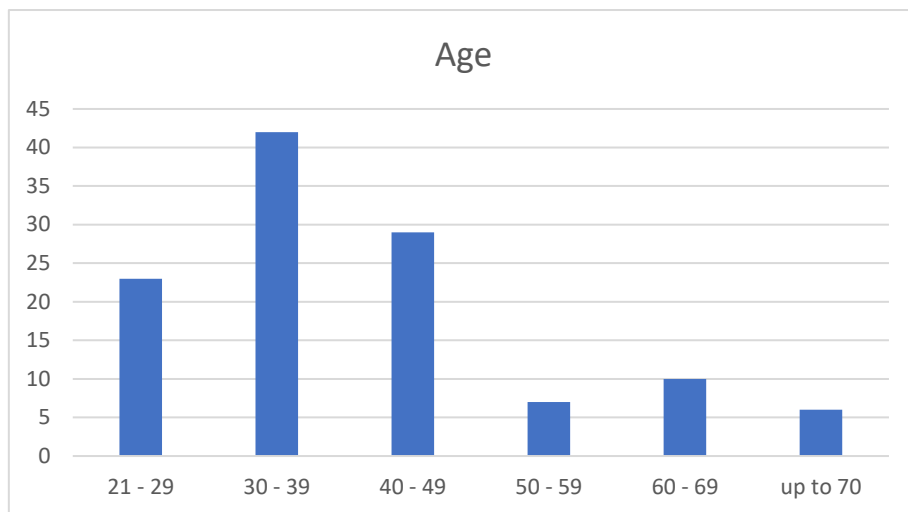


Figure 1: Age

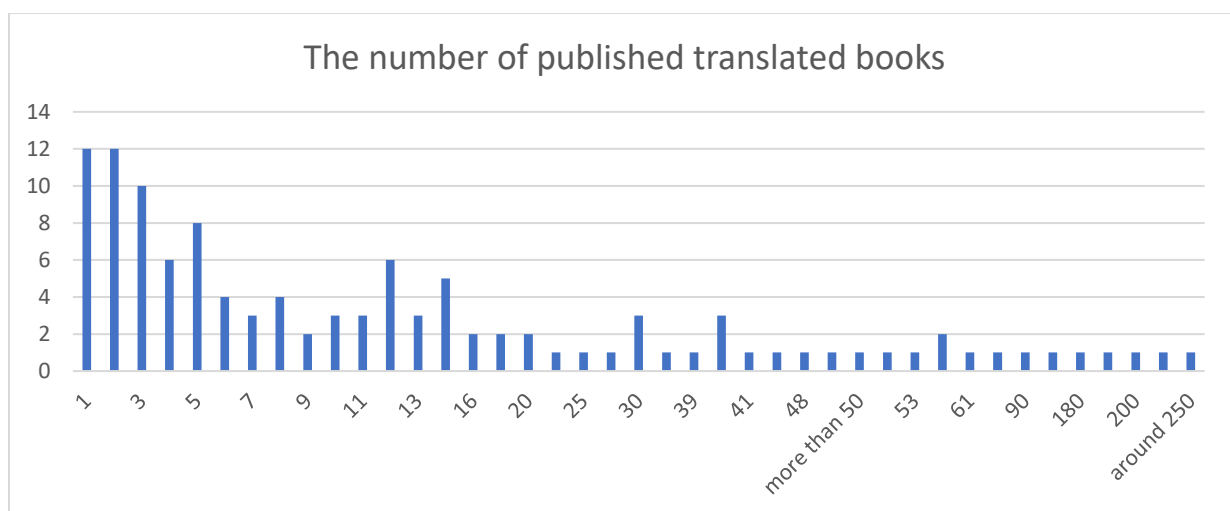


Figure 2: The number of published translated books

In terms of their education, almost all of the respondents had graduated from university (98%), most of them in the field of translation and interpreting (58%) or related philological fields (24%).

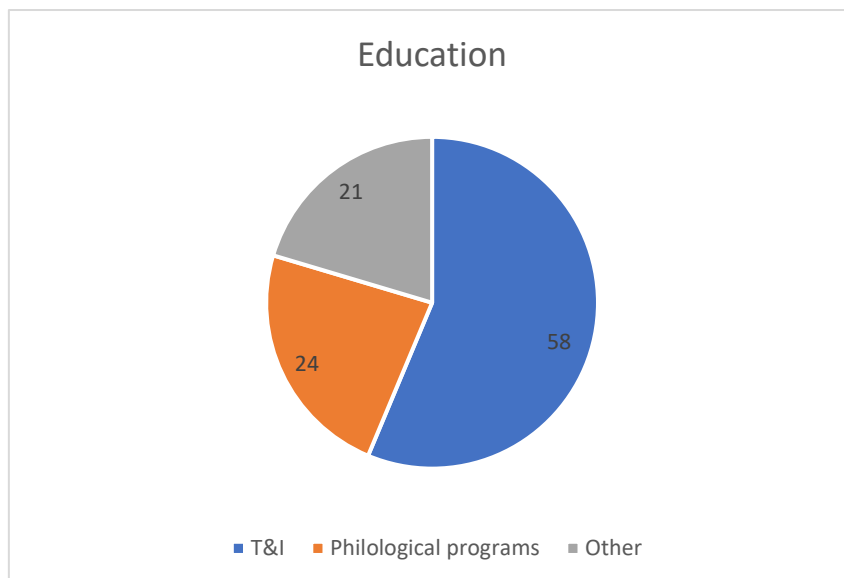


Figure 3: Education

The data also documents a broad collection of employers. The respondents worked for more than 60 publishing houses, including the biggest Slovak ones, but also smaller, specialized publishers.

3 The literary translators' working conditions

The second part of the survey contained questions regarding the participants' last published translation. The data collected from this part demonstrated a rather varied distribution of translated literature in terms of genre (see Fig. 4) and source languages (see Fig. 5). This data was crucial, since one of the aims of the survey was to determine whether genre or source language (more or less widely spoken language) are reflected in the rates.

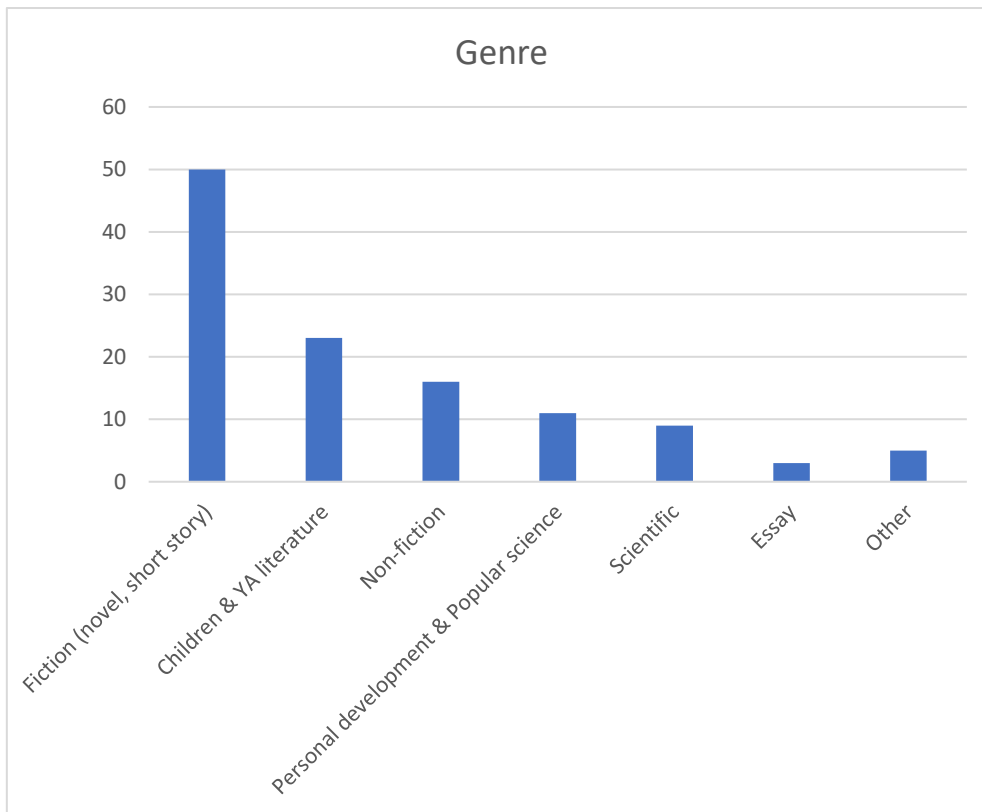


Figure 4: Genre

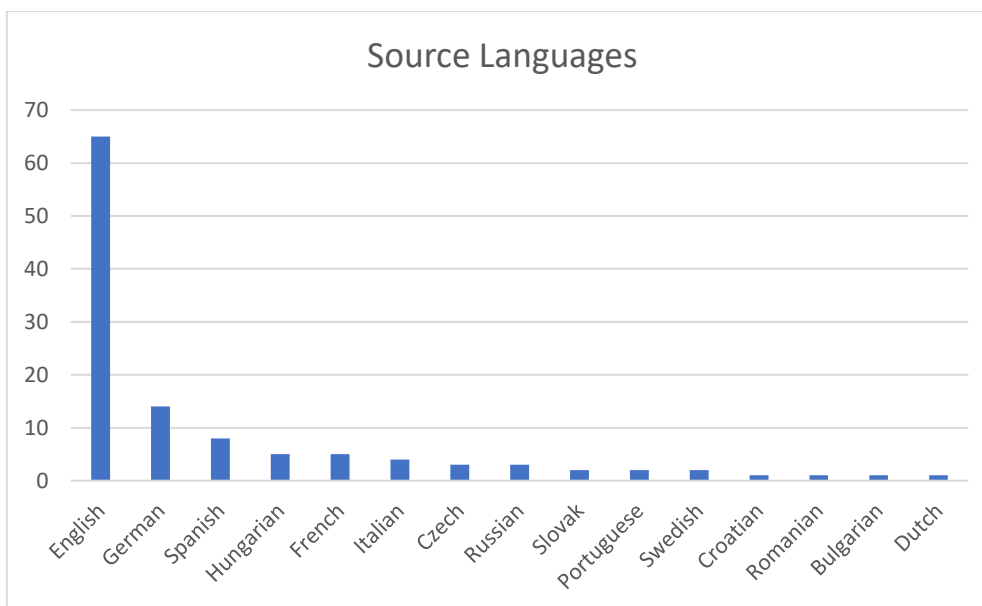


Figure 5:Source languages

4 Rates

The survey has shown that the average rate for a standard page (of 1,800 characters incl. spaces) of literary translation in Slovakia is 6.70 EUR,

which can be viewed as very low⁸ and which, moreover, seems to have remained stagnant for several years.⁹ However, the translators were also asked how long it does on average take them to translate one standard page. Using the two data sets, we have calculated that if translators only earned their living from literary translation (which means they would spend 40 hours a week translating literary texts), they would earn a monthly gross income of mere 700 euros¹⁰. It is important to note that outside the publishing industry, the translation rate for one standard page translated to Slovak is around 16.26 EUR.¹¹

Apart from the arithmetic mean, another important value concerning the translators' rates was standard deviation. The standard deviation of 1.59 means that the literary translation rates in Slovakia have remained constant and show only minor deviations from the arithmetic mean. That data has not shown any correlation (beyond the level of statistical error) between the rate and source language or genre or even the translator's experience. The translators working with more widely spoken languages (i.e. English or German) got, on average, the same rate per standard page as their colleagues translating from less widely spoken languages (like

⁸ It is also important to note that this rate is actually the sum of the remuneration for creating the translation plus the remuneration for licensing the work (translation). The remuneration for licensing, which should reflect the scope of dissemination of the work, is more often than not a mere clause mentioned in the contract and does not factor into the rate in real terms.

⁹ According to CEATL (2007/2008), which presents data from 2005/2006, Slovak literary translators earned, on average, a bit more – 7.25 EUR per standard page.

¹⁰ Several respondents had to be excluded from the sample. This was because they claimed they translated immensely difficult works and the translation took them unexpectedly long. When asked about how much time they spent at one standard page, they stated very rough estimates like "half a day" which were impossible to quantify for statistical purposes. If data from those respondents were included in the sample, the average income of Slovak literary translators would approach the country's average monthly minimal income (in 2019 at 520 EUR).

¹¹ This rate approximation comes from the Slovak Association of Translators and Interpreters who surveyed its members in 2018. However, this group of translators is specific due to their rather high level of professionalization, with many of the members also being sworn translators. Compared to this, Djovčoš's 2015 survey covered a broader sample of translators. This survey shows non-literary translators earning between 10 to 15 EUR per standard page. Interestingly enough, the DoSlov (2019) survey did not show a statistically significant correlation between rates and membership in translators' associations. Moreover, no correlation was found between rates and the translator's professional experience (measured by the number of translated books).

Bulgarian or Croatian). The translator who had translated only one book earned on average the same as those with more than 200 books to their names. The low standard deviation also shows that even the complexity of the source text does not affect the rate.

The translators were also asked whether they are satisfied with their rates. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents (79%) stated that they were not satisfied.

This is surely one of the reasons why almost none of the respondents earned their living from literary translation alone. The translators were also asked what percentage of their income came from literary translation. Only 14.5% of respondents reported that income from literary translation constituted more than half of their total income.

5 Professionalization of literary translators in Slovakia

In this part of the study, we will attempt to determine the degree of professionalization of literary translators in Slovakia on the basis of the model proposed by Tseng (1992). Even though the author developed the model to explain the dynamics within the interpreting profession, it also has proved useful and fruitful in attempts to model the translation profession (as seen in the works of Pym 2012, Dybiec-Gajer 2014, and others). This model is successive and phase-based. It aims to describe the gradual development of an occupational group toward professionalization. I shall try to adapt the description to better adhere to case pertaining to the translation market.

Phase I. of professionalization is characterized by market disorder which brings about bitter competition among practitioners (translators). This oftentimes entails malpractices such as over-reliance on advertising and price dumping to lure over new clients. The unregulated market is open even to the most unqualified. Clients are often unaware of what the profession entails, and some of them do not even demand high-quality services. What matters more to the clients looking for service providers is price, and even those who require quality services do not know where to look for qualified translators. At this stage the overall quality of the services tends to be low.

(1) indicates the aspiration of a group of practitioners to implement professional practices upon the disorganized market and thus to promote the status of the emerging profession and improve the work conditions. The emergent of training institutions offering education in the given professional field signals the transition to Phase II. of professionalization.

(2) indicates a possible source of market disturbance created by training institutions which have a potential negative impact on the market conditions. In this case, training institutions might supply more professionals than it is demanded by the market, thus disproportionately driving up competition. Training institution may also negatively affect the market by having low admission standards, less demanding study requirements, unqualified teaching staff, etc. The resulting market

distortion does not allow practitioners to control their working conditions; the prices fluctuate and are much lower than expected. The market is in chaos and quality control does not work. Such market conditions may even frustrate the practitioners to the point of leaving the profession and look for work elsewhere. Public trust and a professional code of conduct are practically almost non-existent.

(3) indicates the positive effects of some training institutions as sources of cohesion on the market. They impact the practitioners' behaviors and in effect might help to divide the market into qualified, inadequately qualified, and unqualified translators. (Mostly) the qualified translators, who are dissatisfied with the chaotic market conditions, may take upon themselves to improve their professional standing. At this points, steps are taken to regulate the influx of unqualified practitioners to the market.

(4) indicates further the development and improvement of relevant training institution which take cues from the market and adapt their practices to adequately prepare up-and-coming professionals. (6) represents the process of like-minded translators willing to unite into professional associations whose aim is to improve working conditions, set standards for new professionals entering the market, and build recognition for the profession among clients and members of the public. The creation of professional associations marks a turning point in the process of professionalization and represents a transition to Phase III.

(5) and (7) show the interaction between training institutions and professional associations which leads to the growth of consensus and sense of commitment of translators to their profession. Professional associations gradually create a code of conduct (8) whose aim is to prevent price dumping and questionable business practices. The code of conduct will further develop and become more sophisticated. (9) shows that in time a professional association may start to regulate its admission policy, which is also a means of enhancing the status of an aspiring profession as well as controlling price dumping and unfair competition. Arrows (10), (11), and (13) indicate the influence of professional associations on the public, including clients and legal authorities. At this stage clients may turn to the professional association to recommend qualified professionals able to fulfill their needs. Associations can also help increase public awareness about the profession through the media, e. g. in popularizing articles. In the case of literary translation, this is where popularizing translation criticism, which is just getting started in Slovakia, may step in. Another means of raising awareness is informing the public about best (translation) practices and advising clients to avoid possible pitfalls when looking for professionals in the field. The aim of the communication with the public is to convince them of the profession's content of work and working conditions, which in effect means achieving market control.

At the transition to Phase IV., the associations try to even further enhance the profession's social standing (12, 14, 11). Recognition by the clients (16), the public (18), together with the public image of unity displayed by the emergent profession (17), gives the professional enough leverage to pressure legal authorities to enact protection and licensure for

the said profession (19, 20). The professional association may even become politically active to further protect the interests of the profession (17). Legal protection in turn bolsters the influence of the professional association.

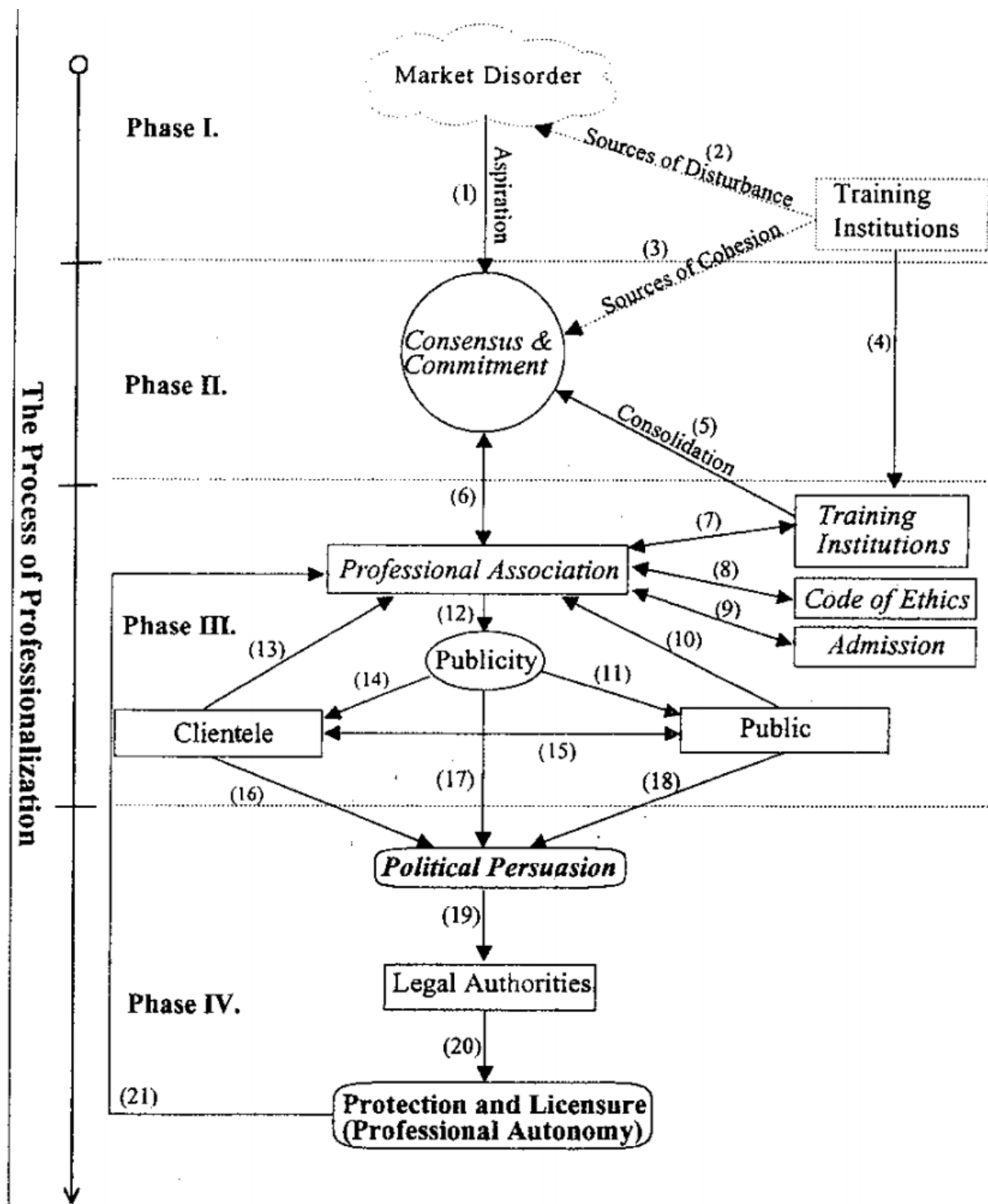


Figure 6

When looking at Tseng's (1992) model, it could be argued that the Slovak literary translation profession has developed beyond the initial market disorder phase half-way toward professionalization. Several

historical circumstances and its present state lead us to assume that the profession has reached the third phase of development. In terms of training institutions, in Slovakia literary translation is taught as part of translation and interpreting training. In Slovakia, the training of translation and interpreting (T&I) first started being taught at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at the University of 17th November in Bratislava (and in 1975 it was moved to the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University, CU). The students of MA study programs at the said university could at first chose to specialize either in literary translation or non-literary translation and interpreting. However, the specialization paths were abandoned in 1974, and literary translation was only offered in obligatory or optional courses. Matej Bel University (MBU) in Banská Bystrica became the second Slovak university to offer a graduate course in translation and interpreting (in the academic year 1997/1998). Later on, the field started being taught at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (CPU, 2002/2003), the University of Presov (UP, 2004/2005), and, lastly, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (PJSU, 2007/2008)¹². At present, literary translation is taught at all the mentioned five universities in one to four courses¹³ in each working language curriculum (depending on the curriculum at the given university and their current staff's expertise)¹⁴. It is also important to note that three of the mentioned Slovak universities offer entire courses about practical aspects of the profession as part of their MA curricula. Instructors often tend to invite notable practitioners or representatives of translators' associations to deliver lectures in these courses. Several of the universities (CPU, MBU, UP) regularly organize lectures and debates with professional translators and interpreters in collaboration with translators' associations¹⁵. Most of the said initiatives aimed at connecting university education and training to the profession and at developing students' awareness of the profession have gained momentum in recent years. It is therefore possible

¹² Courses on literary translation are also featured as optional courses in other philological study fields, but only translation and interpreting curricula are designed to train the skills needed systematically.

¹³ Here only practical courses of literary translation were taken into account. However, apart from practical seminars, every university offers course on literary translation theory or general translation (and interpreting) theory.

¹⁴ At Slovak universities, translation and interpreting is taught in combined curricula (majors) of two working foreign languages or a working foreign language and a Slovak major. The information on the number of subjects is taken from course information letters and checked against interviews with students of all of the said universities. We have decided to report the number of courses in ranges due to the fact that it often happens that not all courses tend to be offered at Slovak universities on a regular basis (this is because of organizational issues and staff availability).

¹⁵ This is the case of the informal conference Hieronymove dni (St. Jerome's Days) organized by Comenius University in collaboration with the Slovak Association of Translators and Interpreters (SAPT). It features lectures and panel discussions with professional translators and interpreters.

that thanks to this the youngest cohort of respondents of the DoSlov 2019 comprises of more translation and interpreting graduates than it was the case with prior generations (provided they potentially also had access to same T&I training). In DoSlov 2019 the youngest cohort of professionals (aged 21–29), of which 23 people completed the survey, comprised entirely of translators who graduated in T&I. The following table shows how the numbers of T&I graduates working as literary translators have grown over the years.

Age	Number of respondents	Proportion of T&I graduates
20–29	23	100%
30–39	42	71%
40–49	29	27.6%
50–59	7	42.9%
60–69	10	40%
70 and more	6	0%

Figure 7

The cohorts of 50- and 60- year-olds do shown an increase in the proportion of T&I graduates; however, these cohorts were among the smallest in the DoSlov 2019 survey. The cohort of 70-year-olds does not contain any T&I graduate. This is perhaps due to the fact that when these professionals were students, the field had merely started being taught, and the training institutions produced far fewer graduates than they would in the future.

The trend of growing numbers of T&I graduates in younger generations of translators has also been demonstrated by the survey of audiovisual translators (Rondzиковá 2019) and general surveys of the translation and interpreting market in Slovakia in 2015 (Djovčoš and Šveda 2017).¹⁶

¹⁶ This figure reprinted from my diploma thesis titled "Professionalization of the audiovisual translator". It uses data from Martin Djovčoš's 2015 survey.

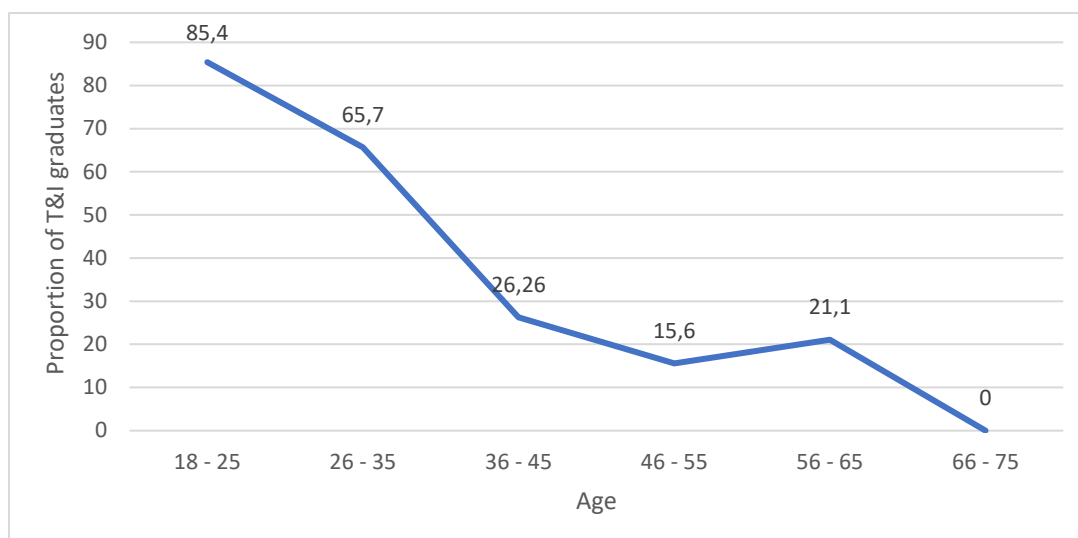


Figure 8

However, Tseng (1992) also points out the possible negative impact of training institutions, and this is true of Slovak universities as well: They do produce far too many translation and interpreting graduates. The literary translation in Slovakia market is saturated, and thus it becomes harder for recent graduates to enter the profession. The market saturation probably also factors into the long-stagnant rates for literary translation.¹⁷

Another problematic area seems to be the admission of qualified up-and-coming translators to the profession (6). This is in part due to chaotic market development in recent history. Immediately after the collapse of state socialism in 1989, the publishing industry became a private business open to anyone who registers for it. This is why in the Slovak market, apart from professional publishing houses, there are entities who do not work with qualified translators, editors, and other professionals involved in the process of publishing translated literature. It must be said, however, that this claim, even though it has long circulated among the practitioners, has still not been verified by scientific research.

In Slovakia there are two associations of literary translators, the Slovak Association of Literary Translators (SSPUL, since 1990) and DoSlov (since 2019; which, at the time of data collection, had not officially launched yet) which is not merely a translators' association but is also open to literary editors. Both organizations advocate for fair working conditions for literary translators, seek to unite them as one community and raise public

¹⁷ The second part of the survey contained questions regarding the participants' last published translation. They were also asked in what year the translation came out. It thus became apparent that in the last ten years translation rates have not changed. It did not reflect basic macroeconomic indicators such as growing inflation or the growth of minimum and average wage. The stagnation is so marked that we could argue that even though the nominal rate for translation did not change, the real rate actually dropped.

awareness about their importance. Apart from these two, all Slovak translators and interpreters can join the civic organization Slovak Association of Translators and Interpreters. In the DoSlov 2019 survey, 40% of respondents stated that they are members of at least one of the mentioned associations. Given that only 5% of all respondents reported that they earned their living solely from literary translation, the Slovak literary translators' degree of commitment to professional associations can be seen as relatively high.

The image of Slovak literary translators in the eyes of the public leaves much to be desired. In DoSlov 2019 the respondents were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction with the literary translators' social status on a 1-to-5 scale (with 5 being the best score). None of 117 respondents said they were very satisfied with the status and only 11% chose the second-best score of 4. Literary translators seem very much "invisible", and the deeply rooted fallacy that anyone who can get by in a foreign language can translate still permeates the public perception. By its very nature, translation criticism could help improve this situation; however, popularizing translation criticism is today almost non-existent¹⁸. The majority of translation critiques produced have either been academic or very superficial, limiting themselves to trivial statements like "the translation reads well" or "the translation does not sound natural" (see more in Laš 2019).

Another factor which has negatively impacted the public image of Slovak literary translator is the affinity of the Slovak and Czech languages. Czech translations are usually sold in Slovak bookstores (but never vice versa). In certain cases this may drive down demand for Slovak translations or lead to unexpected competition of two translations of the same work.¹⁹

Even though this study is about the professionalization of literary translators, in Slovakia it is often the case that professionals who do literary

¹⁸ At present there is only one Slovak magazine with a popularizing translation criticism section – Verzia. Since it launched in September 2020, at the time of writing, it put out only one issue. The magazine Kritika prekladu (launched in 2013) does, as its name suggests, deal with translation criticism, but it is more academic in nature and mostly aimed at students and graduates of translation and interpreting.

¹⁹ Another interesting, albeit not well researched, facet of the Czech vs. Slovak competition in translation problem, are the attitudes of Slovak readers to translation of modern speculative fiction (most notably sci-fi and fantasy). Since the Czech market is bigger and there are more fans of this genre, it only follows that more translations are published. Over the years, Slovak fans got so accustomed to reading speculative fiction in Czech translation, that they sometimes even refuse Slovak translations, regarding them as inferior. In this case it is useful to refer to translation history. As Tyšš has it, "... the pressure of the more established Czech translation culture influences the expectations of [Slovak] readers, thereby disturbing the autonomous development of Slovak translation norms and translation practice" (2017, 108, trans. N. R.).

translation also – at least to a degree – do non-literary translation and even interpreting. Therefore, it is imperative to view the state of Slovak literary translators' professionalization in the wider context of the translation-cum-interpreting profession as a whole. Since it is very difficult for a Slovak professional to earn their living entirely from literary translation, it is only natural that most of the respondents in DoSlov 2019 stated that they do literary translation beside non-literary translation, interpreting, and even other jobs altogether²⁰. In 2007 translation and interpreting services were granted legal status as a regulated profession. This meant that people wanting to start their business in this field need training. Even though the regulated status does not apply to literary translation, it can be argued that since the regulation affects the entire market for the translation and interpreting profession, it gives qualified translators and interpreters the opportunity to stay in the field and leave some room in their portfolio for literary translation. The majority (two thirds) of respondents of the DoSlov 2019 survey stated they were self-employed, retired, students, or on parental leave. One third of the respondents reported they translated literary works beside a full-time employment, and for the majority of those people literary translation income constituted only an insignificant portion of their total income. At the time of writing this article, an initiative to revoke the regulated status of translation and interpreting has come to the fore. If this proposal were to pass, given the outlined correlation, this would have a detrimental impact on the literary translation profession as well.

Conclusions

In recent times, there have been several attempts at and positive trends toward improving the status of literary translator. The sociological data has shown that the profession has been taken up by a growing number of T&I graduates. Other positive developments include the foundation of a new association for literary translators, DoSlov, and a new literary magazine devoted to translated literature and its reflection, Verzia. Another trend which does have a positive impact on the development of the profession is the cooperation between training institutions, professional associations, and practitioners. The development of the profession is hampered by market saturation which is probably one of the reasons why rates for literary translation have long stagnated at a very low level.

²⁰ In 2015 M. Djovčoš conducted a survey of all Slovak translators and interpreters. Only 1% out of 370 respondents stated that they earned their living from literary translation alone and that income from literary translation was the majority of their income. The majority of translators who said they specialized in literary translation also specialized in non-literary translation.

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