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Language Representation Diversity in Independently Translated Literature

Cecilia Too

Abstract

The purpose of this survey is to determine the diversity of language representation in translated literature. Specifically, this study will examine three independent presses and one imprint that publishes literary works, both fiction and nonfiction. This paper surveys the languages represented in the translated works published by these presses over the course of five years, from 2018 to 2022. A case study of one independent press, Other Press, is conducted to further study the genre and country representation in translated literature.

This study finds that European languages, particularly Western European languages, are overrepresented in translated literature by more than a factor of four compared to non-European languages. The possible reasons for this finding are investigated through considering several theories, including Eurocentrism, polysystem theory, Orientalism, and postcolonial theory.

Introduction

According to *Publisher's Weekly*, 86% of translated books are published by independent presses (including AmazonCrossing) and nonprofit presses, compared to 14% by the Big Five. Since small indie presses are at the forefront of spearheading book translation efforts, they are of particular interest to this study.

Often, literature is one of the first ways a person “encounters” a foreign culture. It is a safe, contained, way for a person to learn about a different, unfamiliar culture that they are able to engage in at their own pace. However, when there is a dearth of literature from foreign countries, readers are robbed of the chance to encounter a novel culture on their own terms. If the country is from the global South, often people have a negative perception of that country, thinking it is inferior to the West, even implicitly—and that’s if they have even heard of the country at all.

There is ample evidence that there is strong consumer interest in translated literature. In 2016, *The Guardian* reported that translated literary fiction sold better on average in the UK than literary fiction originally written in English. *The Guardian* reports “although the proportion of translated fiction is still “extremely low”, at 1.5% overall, the sector still “punches well above its weight”, said the book sales monitor, with that 1.5% accounting for 5% of total fiction sales in

2015” (Flood). More recently, in June 2023, *The Guardian* reported that sales of translated fiction increased 22% in 2022, compared to 2021 (Self). Furthermore, “translated fiction is most popular among readers under 35, who account for almost 50% of translated fiction sales” with numbers growing year over year (Self). These figures are clear indicators that there is a reader base for translated literature and suggest untapped market potential. In fact, one of the catalysts for this study was this researcher’s experience of seeking out a poetry book referenced in a Korean drama and finding that it was only available in Korean with no English translation. This researcher would happily pay for a copy of that poetry book in English translation!

Background: The Difficulty in Acquiring Foreign Literature

There is an infamous statistic in the translation world that only 3% of books published in the English language market are books in translation. Why is that?

One reason is the immense difficulty in the acquisitions process. Anton Hur, renowned Korean translator, explains that translators take on the lion’s share of responsibility in championing a work. Often, the translator is the primary advocate for the manuscript. Translators take on the burden of the work that typically a sales agent or rightsholder would handle (Tivnan 13). In the case of literature in translation, the translator is the only party who can read both languages, so they de facto get saddled with the work of pitching the manuscript to the acquisitions editor (Tivnan 13).

Most editors in the Anglophone sphere do not read languages other than English, French, or Spanish. This is a significant barrier in works originating from outside Western Europe getting translated. Since books coming into the American market come from many different countries and languages worldwide, it is more difficult for editors working in the English language market to develop the expertise in the myriad different markets and to determine which books from which countries would have the best chance at appealing to American readers (Williams). As for literature that does get translated, their success largely comes down to luck and connections. Books that are sold for translation in the U.S. are typically sold “through the handful of US agents with close ties to one region or another, who are themselves usually working through professional relationships with particular agents or publishers abroad” (Williams). Foreign books that have a U.S. agent and are packaged for a U.S. sale have the best

chance at getting into the U.S. market. However, luck plays a disproportionately large factor in which manuscripts make it to an editor's desk.

Methods

First, this paper will survey the language representation of four presses that publish translated literature. Three presses are independent presses: Two Lines Press, New Directions Publishing, and Other Press. The fourth press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG) is an imprint of Macmillan which I have included as a point of comparison. Farrar, Straus and Giroux is not considered an independent press. The analysis will examine books published from 2018 through 2022 (1/1/2018 to 12/31/2022), covering a span of five years. This analysis will show the proportion of languages that are of Western European origin, European origin, and non-European origin.

Second, this paper will examine what genres, languages, and countries are represented in translated literature through a case study of Other Press. Again, the case study will present data on books published over the course of five years, 2018 through 2022.

Data: Language Representation Across Indie Presses

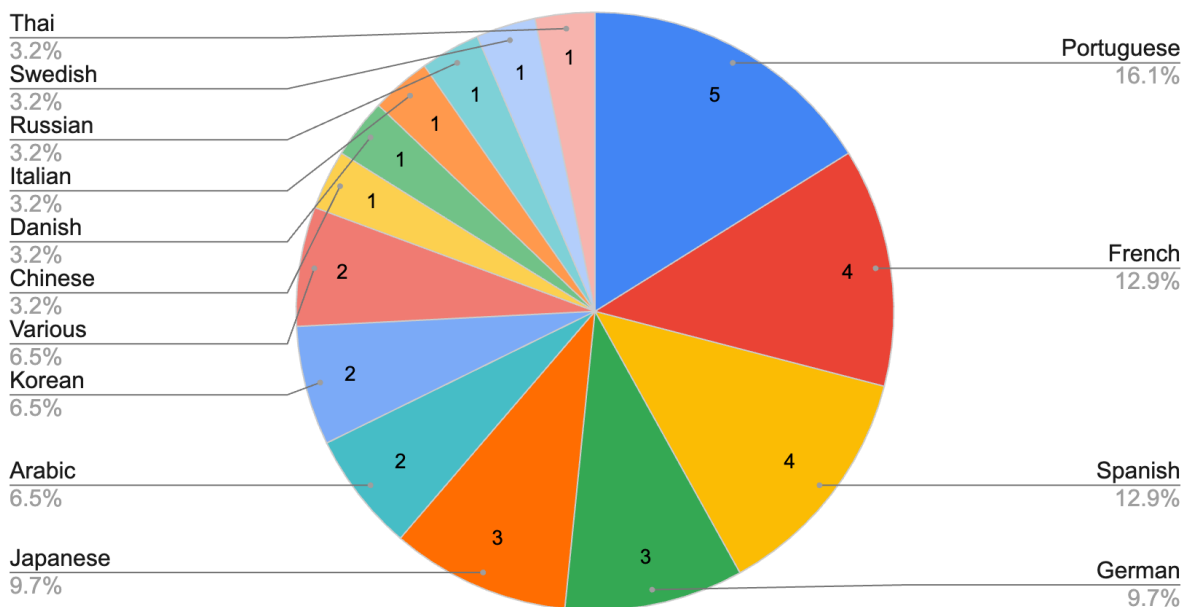
In this section, four presses are surveyed to determine the state of language representation in translated literature. The survey includes three independent presses and one Big Five imprint, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG), which is an imprint of Macmillan. The three independent presses surveyed are Two Lines Press, New Directions Publishing, and Other Press.

The languages represented by the books translated are depicted in pie charts. To be clear, these languages represent the language the book was originally published in. All of these titles were later translated into English. Only languages of translated books published from 2018 through 2022 for a total of five years were included in this survey. The data is sourced from *Publisher's Weekly* Translation Database.

In this analysis, the term "Western Europe" includes the British Isles, France, Germany, and Austria, as well as countries traditionally considered part of Southern Europe such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy. It does not include Scandinavian countries of Northern Europe such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, nor does it include any countries east of Germany.

Figure 1: Two Lines Press

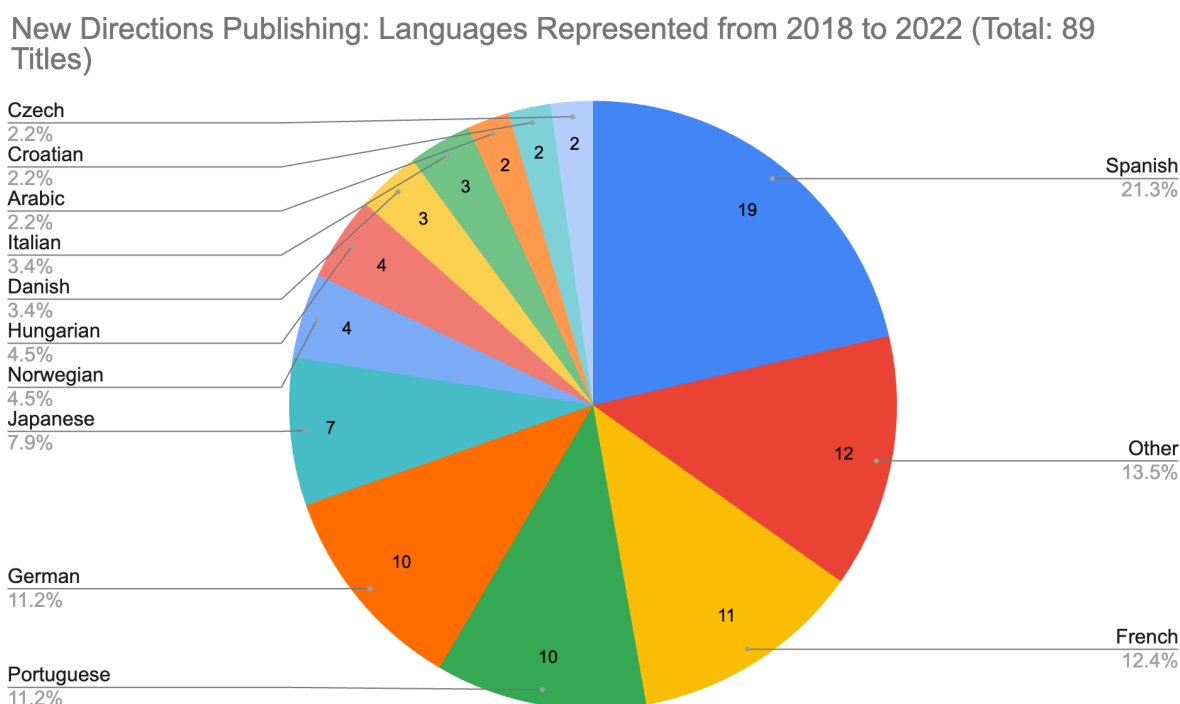
Two Lines Press: Languages Represented from 2018 to 2022 (Total: 31 Titles)



Two Lines Press publishes exclusively translated works. At thirty-one titles published within the specified five year span, Two Lines is the smallest press in this survey. Two Lines Press' top five most translated languages are Portuguese, French, Spanish, German, and Japanese, in order of frequency. These five languages make up slightly more than half of their translated titles at 61.29% of the pie chart. French and Spanish make up 25% or a quarter of languages represented.

Notably, there is a healthy mix of languages in the composition of their published titles. Some of the less commonly translated languages represented are Danish, Chinese, and Thai. No one language appears to dominate. However, there appears to be bias towards languages of Western European origin. Seventeen out of thirty-one titles, or 55%, are Western European languages (Portuguese, French, Spanish, German, and Italian).

Nine out of thirty-one titles, or 29%, represent titles from non-European languages (Japanese, Arabic, Korean, Chinese, Thai).

Figure 2: New Directions Publishing

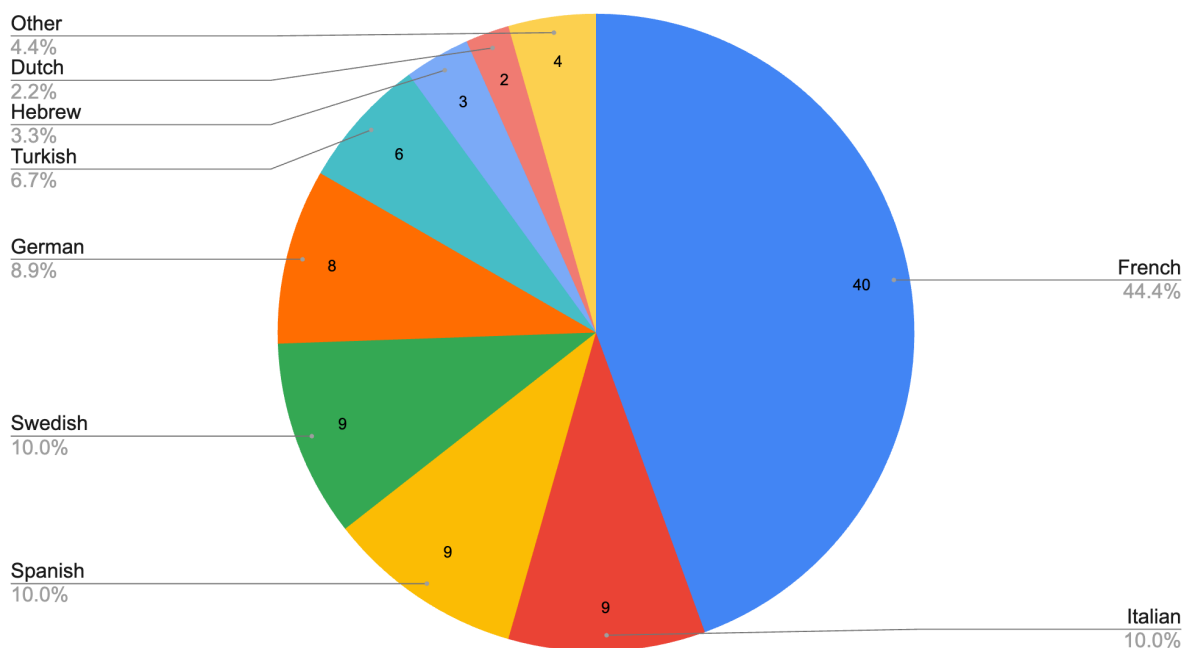
New Directions Publishing is outstanding in their representation of less commonly translated languages. Around a third of the pie chart consists of languages rarely seen in translated literature. Languages represented that no other press in this survey published include Albanian, Belarussian, Bengali, Hungarian, Greek, Persian, Polish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese. These underrepresented languages tend to originate from Eastern Europe and Asia. The “Other” slice consists of twelve languages: Albanian, Belarussian, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, Greek, Korean, Persian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese.

Spanish, French, Portuguese, and German were the most represented languages, in order of frequency. French and Spanish make up 33.7% or a third of published titles. Fifty-three out of eighty-nine titles, or 60%, are Western European languages (Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, and Italian).

Twelve out of eighty-nine titles, or 13%, represent titles from non-European languages (Japanese, Bengali, Persian, Vietnamese, Arabic).

Figure 3: Other Press

Other Press: Languages Represented from 2018 to 2022 (Total: 90 Titles)



Other Press publishes works that “represent literature at its best” (“Other Press”). Other Press publishes many translated works but does not publish translations exclusively.

The “Other” slice consists of four languages that were each published once by Other Press: Catalan, Korean, Portuguese, and Romanian.

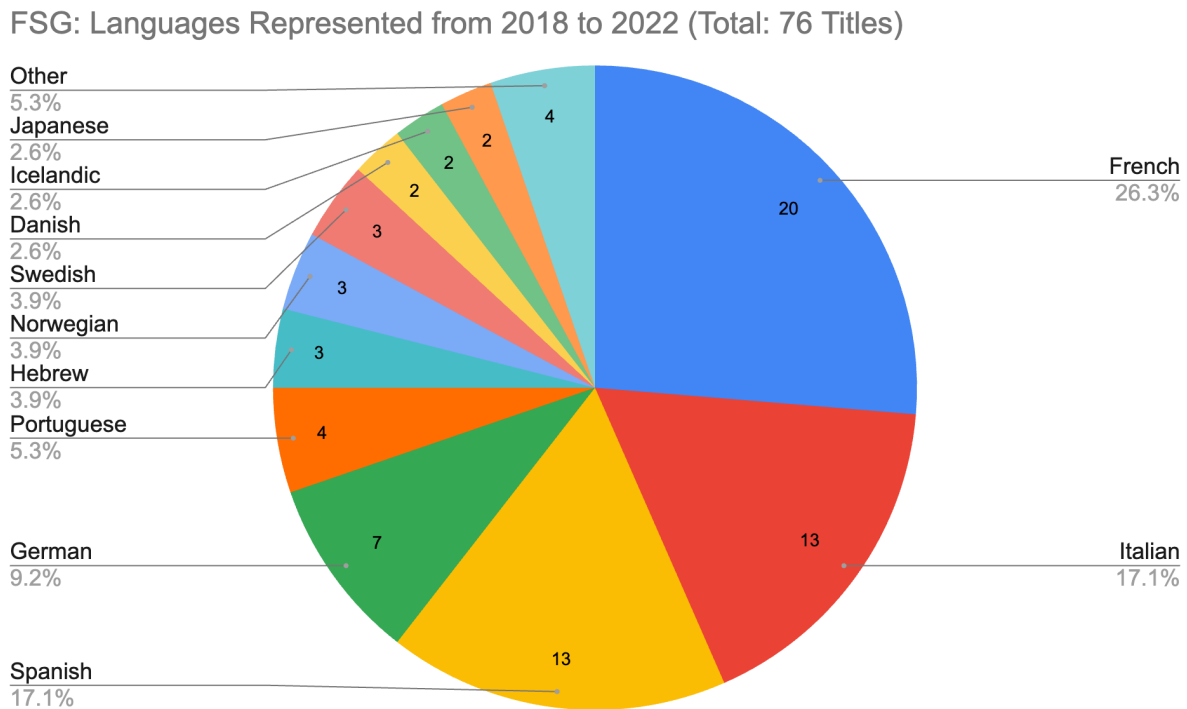
French was by far the most translated language at 44%, with 40 titles translated, making up nearly half of all translated titles. Other Press translated the most titles in French by unit and percentage. Italian, Spanish, and Swedish followed at 10% each, and German at 8.9% with 8 titles. Because of the heavy emphasis on French titles, the language diversity of Other Press is not as expansive as some of the other presses surveyed.

French and Spanish make up 54%, or nearly 3/5ths of all published translated titles. Sixty-eight out of ninety titles, or 75%, are Western European languages (French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch).

Notable languages represented are Romanian, Catalan, and Turkish.

Ten out of ninety titles, or 11%, represent titles from non-European languages (Turkish, Hebrew, Korean).

Figure 4: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG)



The languages that were published once by FSG from 2018 to 2022 are Russian, Dutch, Chinese, and Arabic, indicated in the “Other” slice.

Initially, FSG appears to publish a healthy mix of different languages. However, upon closer examination, around three-fourths of the pie chart represent Western European languages, with the remaining one-fourth representing the rest of the world. Fifty-eight out of seventy-six titles, or 76%, represent Western European languages.

French, Italian, and Spanish were the most represented languages, in order of frequency. These languages made up 61% percent of translated titles.

Notable languages represented are Icelandic, Norwegian, and Hebrew.

Seven out of seventy-six titles, or 9.2%, are from non-European languages (Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic).

Patterns in the Data

Patterns in Language Representation

This survey revealed many interesting patterns in which languages are best represented by the translated literature published by these four presses. The observed patterns in the data are presented in a Q&A format below.

Q: What languages were consistently represented?

A: French and Spanish were well-represented across all four presses. Besides French and Spanish, Portuguese is a favorite of the presses surveyed. Every press published at least one Portuguese title. German and Italian were also consistently represented in all four presses.

Q: What was the most translated language?

A: French was the most translated language for two presses, Other Press and FSG. Portuguese was Two Lines' most translated language. Spanish was New Directions' most translated language.

Q: What "rare" language was favored by the presses in the survey sample?

A: Korean was published by all three indie presses, but not by FSG. Arabic was published by two indie presses and FSG, but not by Other Press.

Q: What was the average representation of Western European languages?

A: The average percentage of Western European language representation across all four presses is 65.25%.

Q: What was the average representation of non-European languages?

A: The average percentage of non-European language representation across all four presses is 15.55%.

FSG Compared to Indie Presses

As a point of comparison, FSG does not particularly stand out in terms of ambitiousness of publishing underrepresented translated literature compared to the three indie presses surveyed.

In terms of its percentage of published Western European language translations relative to other indie presses, FSG comes in last at 76% compared to the third-ranked indie press Other Press at 75%. New Directions Publishing ranks second at 59% published Western European translations, while Two Lines Press ranks first at 51%.

FSG also did not publish any translation from a novel language that no other press surveyed published. It was this researcher's hypothesis that as a vaunted imprint of a Big Five publisher with greater access to resources than smaller independent presses, FSG would be an industry leader in setting the bar for translated literature. However, FSG performs worse than independent presses in terms of the language diversity of its translated literature.

Case Study: Other Press

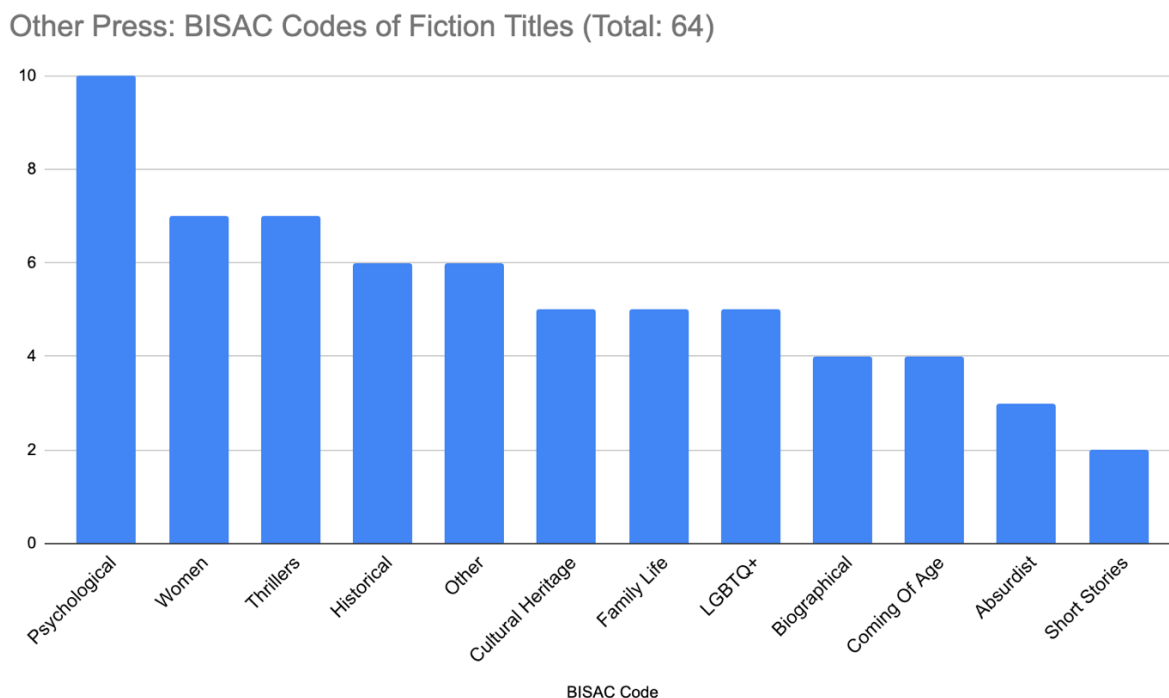
In this section, a case study of Other Press is conducted. In this case study, the genres published by Other Press is examined through an analysis of BISAC codes. The language representation and country representation is examined in a more granular manner through separate pie charts for fiction and nonfiction. Thus, the analysis is split into two sections: Fiction and Nonfiction. The purpose of this analysis is to survey the genres, languages, and countries represented in translated literature published by Other Press.

The analysis covers the same time frame, from 2018 to 2022 (1/1/2018 to 12/31/2022). The language and country data are from *Publisher's Weekly* translation database. The BISAC code data is sourced from Edelweiss, a catalog database used by the book trade.

BISAC codes are a method used by publishers to categorize a book. In other words, BISAC codes indicate the genre of a book. They influence how a book is marketed and shelved in a bookstore. In this case study, I use BISAC codes as a proxy for the genre of a book.

Part I: Other Press Fiction Titles

Figure 5: Other Press: BISAC Codes of Fiction Titles



Other (6 titles): Literary Collections / Asian, Classics, Disaster, Dystopian, Romance, Satire

Of the fiction titles, there were ten Psychological titles published, which was the most common genre. Women and Thrillers are tied for the second most popular genre at seven titles each. Next, Historical and Other are tied for third most popular genre at six titles each.

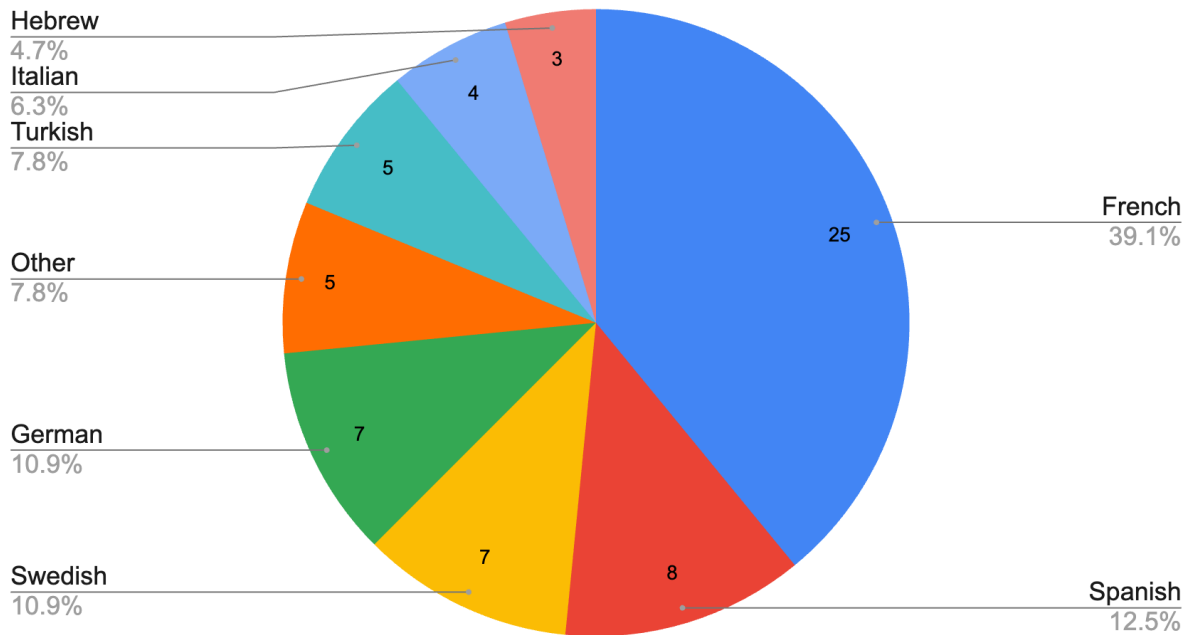
Compared to Nonfiction, Fiction titles are spread out across a broad range of at twelve genres, if “Other” is counted as one genre. The prevalence of Psychological titles is likely due to Other Press’ history as a press that specialized in psychological and academic works.

Genres that are more unusual, in that they are less commonly seen, are Cultural Heritage, LGBTQ+, and Absurdist.

Furthermore, there appears to be a progressive and literary bent to the genres represented.

Figure 6: Other Press: Languages Represented in Fiction

Other Press: Languages Represented in Fiction (Total: 64)



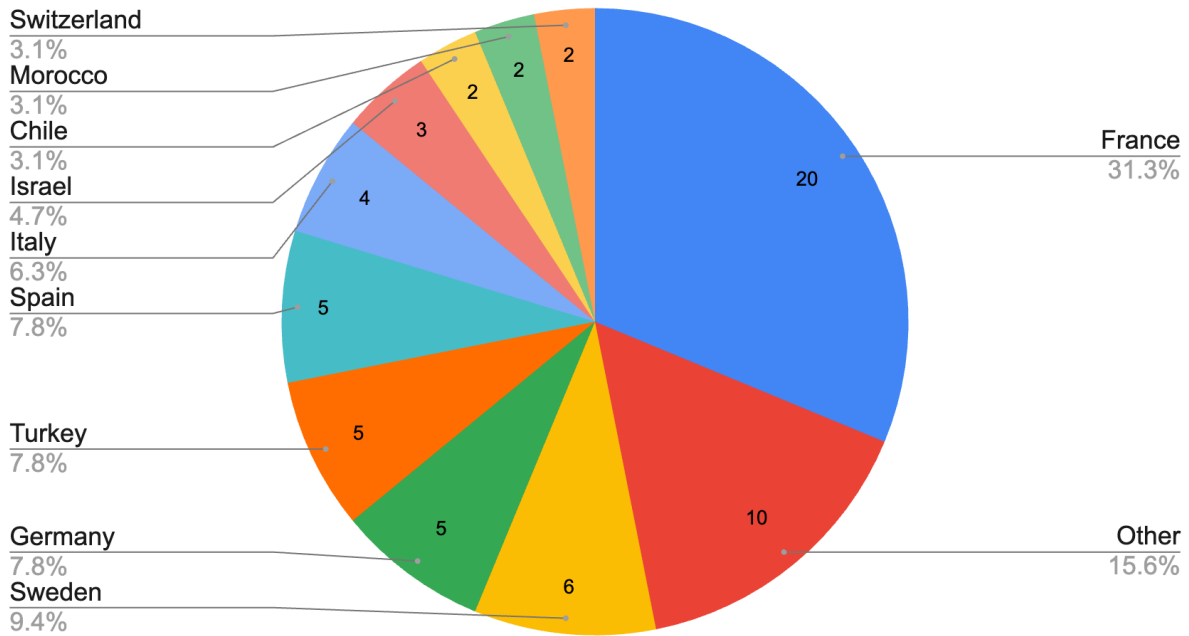
Other: Dutch, Romanian, Catalan, Korean, Portuguese

The pie chart is similar to Other Press' overall language representation, Figure 3, with every language with a frequency of 2 or greater also appearing here. The percentage of French fiction titles is 5% lower than the percentage of French titles overall, 44%. The language diversity of titles in fiction is greater than in nonfiction.

Forty-four out of sixty-four titles, or 69%, represent major languages of Western European origin (French, Spanish, German, Italian).

Figure 7: Other Press: Countries Represented in Fiction

Other Press: Countries Represented in Fiction (Total: 64)



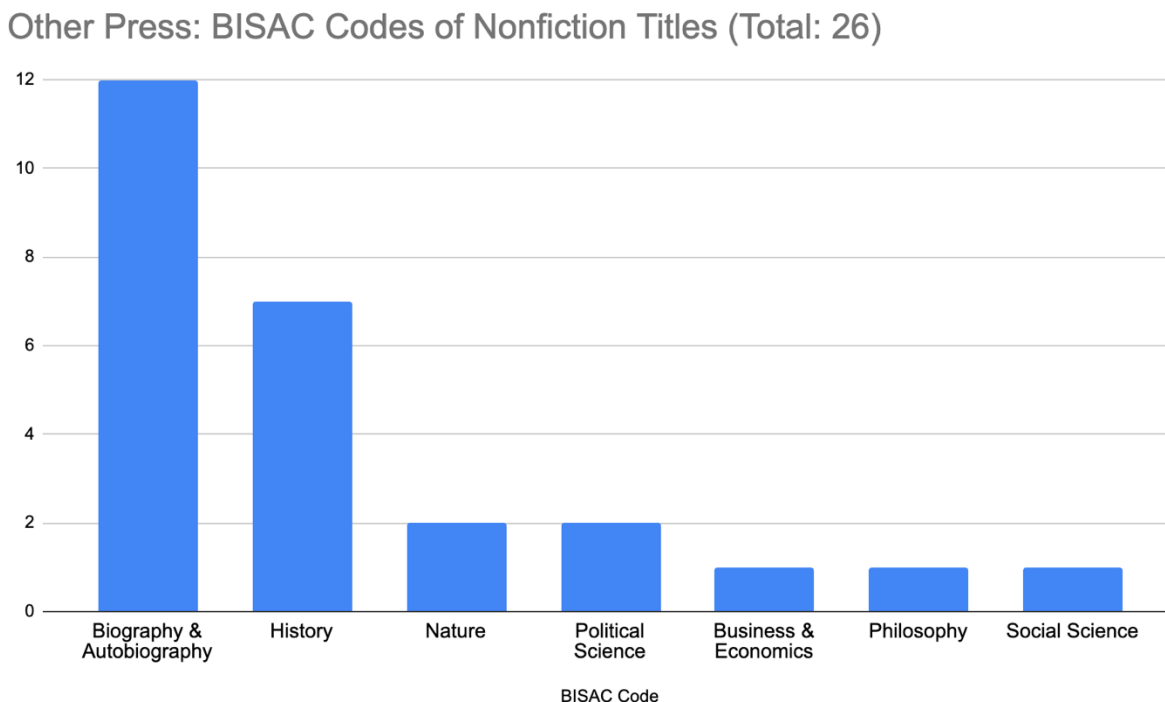
Other:

Romania, Algeria, Egypt, Cote D'Ivoire, Brazil, Cameroon, Argentina, Korea, Ethiopia, Netherlands

There is a greater diversity of countries represented here than in nonfiction. Eleven countries are non-European.

Part II: Other Press Nonfiction Titles

Figure 8: Other Press: BISAC Codes of Nonfiction Titles

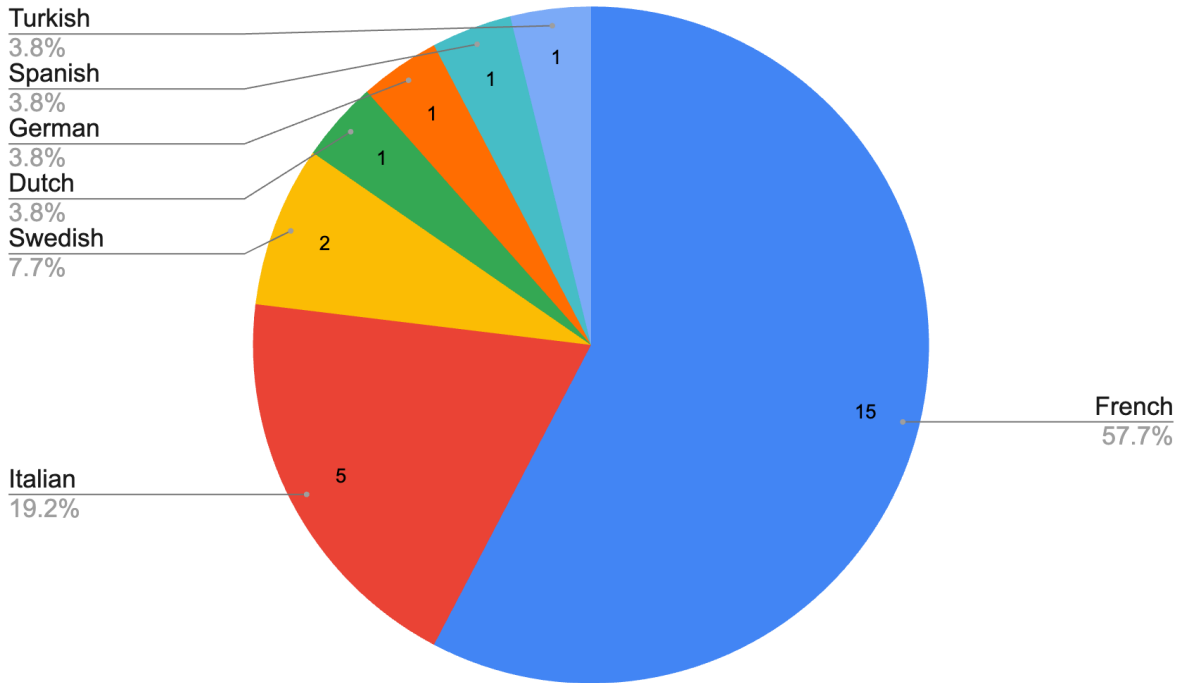


Of the nonfiction titles, Biography & Autobiography dominate by far with twelve titles, almost double the second most common genre. The next most common genre is History at seven titles. Afterwards, the number of titles per genre drops dramatically with two titles at most for the same genre. The remaining genres represented are Nature, Political Science, Business & Economics, Philosophy, and Social Science. Besides the top two genres, the genres lean heavily towards social science.

Compared to Fiction, there is much less variety and spread across genres. Nonfiction is instead primarily concentrated into two genres, Biography & Autobiography and History. Though the reason for this is beyond the scope of the data, this researcher speculates that perhaps the publisher is tapping into readers' desire to experience and learn about lives other than their own through literature.

Figure 9: Other Press: Languages Represented in Nonfiction

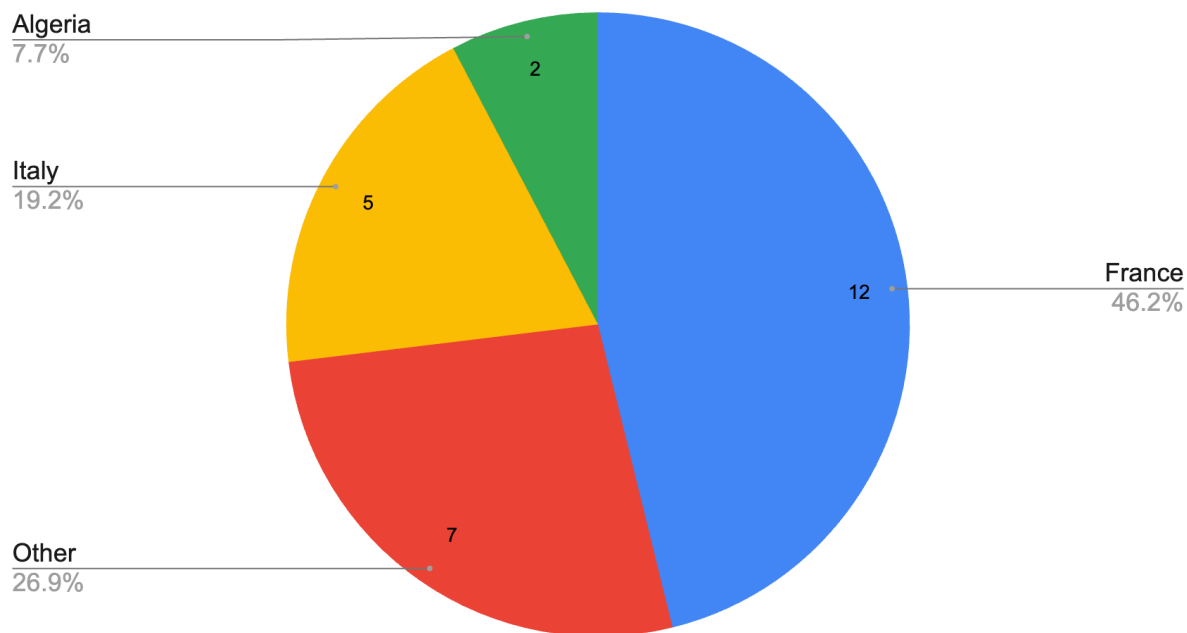
Other Press: Languages Represented in Nonfiction (Total: 26)



French and Italian comprise the lion's share of the languages in nonfiction at twenty titles, or 77%. The remaining quarter of the chart is represented by Swedish, Dutch, German, Spanish, and Turkish. All languages originate from in Europe, except for Turkish in the Middle East.

Figure 10: Other Press: Countries Represented in Nonfiction

The percentage of French titles is somewhat higher than the percentage of French titles overall, 44%. Nearly all of the languages represented except Turkish are of European origin.

Other Press: Countries Represented in Nonfiction (Total: 26)

Other: Belgium, Czech Republic, Lebanon, Sweden, Germany, Turkey, Greece

Note that there are a total of four countries outside of Europe represented.

Questions Arise

It is clear that Western European languages are overrepresented in translated literature. But what explains the clear bias in favor of Western European languages? Why is the rest of the world missing entirely or underrepresented in translated literature? There are hardly any titles translated from languages originating from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (including the Caribbean), even though these three continents comprise 85.46% of the world population (Population Reference Bureau). If translated literature is meant to give readers a glimpse into the richness of the variety of human culture and stories around the globe, why are publishers primarily translating works from Western Europe?

Theoretical Frameworks

Eurocentrism

One theory that could account for the overrepresentation of Western European languages in translated literature is Eurocentrism. In his essay “Continentalism and the invention of traditions in translation studies,” Dirk Delabastita presents a definition of Eurocentrism (Doorslaer 30). Delabastita argues that the concept of Eurocentrism can be broken down into the following beliefs and convictions (emphasis mine):

1. below the apparent variety of cultural manifestations, there is something like a common and continuous European heritage, which has its roots in the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions and developed throughout the centuries, finally articulating itself in Enlightened modern notions of freedom, democracy, organized states, rational science, technology, progress, and so on;
2. these values and achievements have given **Europe a dominant place in the military, political, economic and intellectual history of the world** in the past centuries;
3. **Europe may safely assume that its models of the world and its value systems apply (or are waiting to be applied) elsewhere**, as well;
4. in axiological terms, **the European models and values are intrinsically superior to non-Western ones**; in diachronic terms they are paradoxically both more ancient (i.e., original) and more modern (i.e., spearheading the future that humanity is or should be moving toward).

Eurocentrism claims that Europe's dominance justifies the claim that European models of the world and value systems apply elsewhere. It follows that European models and values are seen as intrinsically superior to non-Western values. The acquisition of primarily European language foreign literature over literature originating from non-European countries and continents reflects Eurocentrism in the priorities of American publishing houses. The average percentage of Western European language representation across all four presses is 65.25% while the average percentage of non-European language representation across all four presses is 15.55%. In effect, Western European languages are translated at a startling rate of four times more than non-European languages. When the disparity between Western European languages and the non-European world is so large, it's hard not to conclude that the presses surveyed have a strong Eurocentric bias.

Though it is disheartening to see the extent of Eurocentric influence on translated literature, it is important to keep in mind the wider context that translated literature occupies in the greater publishing ecosystem. Literature in translation lives in a marginalized place in the book publishing market, making up only around three percent of the English language market. Susan Pickford establishes that "English is by far the most central language in the global polysystem: its share of the international publishing market rose from 40 to 60 percent between 1979 and 2004" (Pickford 221). Although this statistic dates from twenty years ago, it is reasonable to assume that the "the hegemonic reach of English in the international literary marketplace" has only expanded since (Pickford 222).

Polysystem Theory

According to Itamar Even-Sohar's polysystem theory, noted as early as the 1970s, "the place allotted to literature in translation in a given culture depends on the relative degree of cultural dominance between the two languages. This reflects the uneven distribution of political, social, and cultural forms of capital across languages." (Pickford 221). Polysystem theory explains why there are so few books translated into English. The dearth of translated literature in general is a reflection of the incredible dominance of the English language in terms of political, social, and cultural capital compared to other languages, even other major Western European languages such as French and Spanish. The English language hegemony is also reflected in the

fact that while there is a dedicated book scouting industry that promotes American titles abroad, there is no industry of the same scale going in the other direction.

The choice of which languages to translate also reflects the degree of cultural dominance each language possesses. It seems likely that Western European languages such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Italian possess greater cultural, social, and political capital than say, Swahili or Vietnamese. Furthermore, publishing is an industry that trades in cultural capital. Countries and languages that are perceived as less culturally prestigious are unlikely to be selected to be translated. Publishing translating literature is thought to be a risky endeavor because the market potential is thought to be uncertain while translating literature involves extra expenditures for foreign rights and translation work. Given these factors, along with the difficulties in acquisitions, it is perhaps not surprising that few non-European languages ever get translated into the English language publishing market.

Orientalism

Finally, we turn to Edward Said's landmark work *Orientalism* to illuminate another aspect of publishers' reluctance to publish literature from non-European languages. Published in 1978, *Orientalism* is credited as a foundational work in post-colonial theory.

In constructing his theory of Orientalism, Said relied on Foucault's theory of discourse. For Foucault, a discourse is "a collection of statements unified by the designation of a common object of analysis, by particular ways of articulating knowledge about that object, and by certain connections, especially regularity, order, and systematicity" (Childs and Williams 98). Through the Foucauldian perspective, Said is able to "bring together a great variety of Western texts... under the heading of a single discourse, namely Orientalism" (Childs and Williams 99). These texts can range from disciplines such as geography, politics, literature, ethnography, linguistics, and history (Childs and Williams 98). Although these disciplines are distinct, "what unites these texts is the forms of knowledge they produce about their object of study—the Orient—and the power relations which are thereby involved" (Childs and Williams 99). Despite their differences, all of these texts "can be seen as articulating congruent forms of knowledge about the Orient, thereby giving rise to a sort of mega-discourse," called Orientalism (Childs and Williams 99).

In Foucault's model, power and knowledge are closely linked—one does not occur without the other (Childs and Williams 98). Knowledge gives rise to power, but it is also produced by the operations of power (Childs and Williams 98).

According to Childs and Williams, power/knowledge operates in the case of Orientalism as a function of a Western “will to knowledge” which results in the production of texts/knowledge about the East (Childs and Williams 100). “Such knowledge-production is only possible, however, because of the power of the West over the East, manifested in the ability of Europeans to travel, trade, study, excavate, describe, and analyze as they please. In turn, the knowledge produced by these texts invites or justifies the extension of Western power—particularly in the shape of colonialism—over the East....” (Childs and Williams 100).

The ideas of the West's use of power/knowledge to justify colonizing the East echoes Eurocentrism's claim to European superiority and extends it. Not only is Europe superior, but European models and values are thought to be *normal*. From this idea, there is no way to see the East but as “other” because its standards, models, and values are different and incomprehensible to the West. In the process of othering, “the Orient is pinned against the narrow scope of Western standards so as to deem them lesser than” (Arthur 6). Othering “labels the Occident as familiar or normal and the Orient as strange. Said points out that the West sees this process of othering as their duty to represent the East” (Arthur 6).

Another idea that is a consequence of Orientalist thinking is that the West thinks of people from the Orient as people who cannot represent themselves, but must be represented, as Karl Marx put it (Arthur 6). From this lens, people in the East are thought to be incapable of representing themselves and need the help of a European colonizer to speak for them. We still see Orientalist influences in the single-digit numbers of translated titles from Asia and other non-European nations. Non-European languages are still seen as the “other” and not worthy of the investment of translation and publication. European languages still dominate and are repeatedly prioritized over other languages.

Although Orientalism is explicitly about the West's perceptions of the East, the idea of “othering” can be extended to all non-European nations. By limiting the number of publications translated from non-European languages, the American publishing industry is continuing the legacy of Orientalist and colonialist thought. Said's work illuminates why translated literature is so important to diminishing the legacy of colonialist thought and the hierarchy of value it has

assigned to different people groups, languages, and cultures. When the English language hegemony results in the exclusion of translated works of global literature, the vibrancy of the global literary culture suffers.

Conclusion

The data analysis exposes the extreme Western European bias in the niche world of translated literature. It is ironic that in the literary niche meant to offer fresh perspectives and exposure to diverse narrative forms, Western European works are overrepresented relative to the rest of the world. A global literary sphere that is more representative of the world population where translated works in languages originating from Asia, South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and other underrepresented countries are abundant would create a much more colorful and vibrant publishing market. A more diverse literary sphere that is more representative of the global community would give readers greater access to stories written from outside the Western European storytelling tradition and ultimately, greater enjoyment of literature from countries all around the world.

In *Orientalism*, Said “maintained that representations of the Orient should instead be made by the orients themselves and then transferred into Western literature, rather than the other way round” as a way of challenging “inaccurate, Western-made depictions of the East” in the discourse (Arthur 7; Arthur 5). One way this could be realized is if more literature written by foreign writers could make their way into the English language book publishing market. Translated literature is a means by which the consequences of centuries worth of colonialism, Eurocentrism, and Orientalism can be undone. By publishing writing from authors outside North America and Europe, we open the doors to the richness of the vast diversity of human culture and languages. It is through publishing translated works that we open up space in the publishing sphere for writers worldwide to represent themselves authentically without their words being mediated through a colonizer.

Further Research

There are many avenues for further research that are beyond the scope of this paper. One avenue is to examine the countries represented in the presses surveyed more closely, other than Other Press. Another is to examine the paratext of the books, such as the back cover copy, and

marketing copy to determine how publishers communicate the value of translated works to readers and within the book trade.

In this data analysis, the scope of research was limited to comparing Western European languages to the rest of the world. Another avenue for further research would be to more closely examine Eastern Europe in the data analysis and include Eastern Europe in comparisons between Europe and the rest of the world.

Going more broadly, it would be interesting to examine more precisely what forces besides the acquisitions process makes publishing translated literature difficult. Determining a more exact cost and benefit breakdown for a publisher would round out the reasons for why so few titles are translated.

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