

Bachelor Thesis:

**Translators in Times of Crisis**

**The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on translators in the Netherlands**

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April-June 2020

6829 words (excluding titles, abstract, listed questions, references and tables)

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## Translators in Times of Crisis

### The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on translators in the Netherlands

#### Abstract

This paper focusses on translators in the Netherlands during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It aims at investigating the effects this pandemic has had on literary and non-literary translators at the time of writing, be it professional or personal effects, and whether there is a difference of effects between the two groups. This thesis is motivated by current developments in Translation Studies, which has started to turn its attention to translators themselves, rather than the texts they produce. Translators are crucial in international and intercultural communication, and therefore need to be understood beyond the way they work. A survey was distributed to several translation organisations (literary and non-literary translation) in order to gain a representative sample of the population of translators in the Netherlands. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions, based on which more in-depth open questions followed. The results were analysed statistically, using SPSS. The statistical analysis was further explored through the qualitative analysis of the responses to the open questions. The results showed that there were hardly any differences between literary and non-literary translators, for most of the questions. The qualitative analysis showed, however, that there was a shift in topics of translation texts towards COVID-19 related texts for non-literary translators, while literary translators expected to see effects further down the line (since many literary projects had been postponed or cancelled). Non-literary translators also experienced a greater drop in translation jobs than literary translators. Personal effects were mostly more stress and difficulty adapting to a new schedule at home – but also the opposite, when translators said they were more relaxed and got more physical exercise. This study shows that the situation is complex and that some translators need help in situations like this (be it mentally or financially), while others do not. The effects of a pandemic such as the COVID-19 pandemic differ per translator and their personal situations.

#### 1. Introduction

Currently, in spring 2020, the world is in the grip of a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan in China in December 2019, after which the virus spread quickly across the globe. It has affected, in one way or another, all countries, many of which are in a lockdown. At the time this study was conducted, the Netherlands were in a so-called “intelligent lockdown”. People were required to work from home, children and students could not attend school or university lectures anymore and needed to follow classes online, and most public facilities were closed down, apart from supermarkets and other goods stores (NOS *Deze sectoren*). Adverse effects on the healthcare infrastructure, employment, the economy, and communication are widespread, and likely to grow in future.

A health crisis like this introduces all kinds of new experiences and situations to which people must adapt in order to protect public health and health infrastructure, while balancing protecting the economy and ensuring social security. It is hard to do so, since global crises do not occur regularly, and thus knowledge on how to adapt is limited. As a consequence, many industries are experiencing changes in their respective markets and no one knows how long these changes will last (NOS *Deze sectoren*). The translation industry is no exception to this; and the changes occurring as a consequence of the pandemic cannot go unstudied, for they will shed light on the adaptability, or lack thereof, of this industry and its workers.

The role of translation in crisis situations has, in recent years, gained attention among Translation Studies (TS) scholars – an area of research also relevant to this COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. Federici and O’Brien include studies on translation and translators in crisis environments and situations in their book. They introduce the notion of “cascading disasters”, defining it as a series of events in which the results of one event lead to a great derangement of social and economic systems (1-2). This is clearly what is happening during the current pandemic. In the introduction, they write mostly about crises caused by natural disasters, which destroys the infrastructure of affected areas. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the destruction of infrastructure is no concern. However, the socio-economic impact, already mentioned above, will no doubt be substantial, and in situations like these communication within and among countries needs to be efficient and accurate in order to provide everyone with sufficient and correct information. In order to do this, translators and interpreters are needed (Federici & O’Brien 6). Federici and O’Brien focus on the role and impact of translation in crises (16); however, this still leaves substantial room for the translators themselves, and their experiences in situations of crises, to be studied.

This research was conducted against a background of preliminary research and anecdotal data which suggested a large impact. A survey instrument was used in order to

investigate the experiences of translators working during the onset and first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their working environment, personal experiences, and psychological effects. A total of 132 respondents was reached.

The contents of this paper are as follows: first the theoretical background and existing research are discussed. Then, the research questions and hypotheses are given, followed by the method section, in which the procedure of constructing the questionnaire is discussed, the quantitative and qualitative results, discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical background and existing research

### 2.1 From translations to translators

First of all, as illustrated by Munday, there has been an increasing interest in translators themselves, their work environment and the relations between translators and other parties involved in the publishing process of a translated text, rather than only the work (or texts) translators produce (223-24). This is a more sociological approach ascendant in TS, rather than textual and language focussed approaches that were the early focus of TS. Munday writes that attention to translators' positions in the translation process has shifted to be more significant in TS; the translators themselves have become a more central focus (235). The focus on translators has a number of dimensions, from the position and role of translators in socio-cultural contexts more broadly, to their position in their workplaces, to their individual psychology in relation to their work. In the following discussion, each of these three aspects will be briefly discussed.

A preliminary sociological perspective on Translation Studies was introduced by Andrew Chesterman. He discusses the TS map constructed by James Holmes, and criticises it for hardly including any branches in which the translators themselves are important. Chesterman argues that since translators are essential to the translation process, they should be given more attention in TS (17). He writes that it is important to consider translators'

ethical, political, social and cultural stances, since these will undoubtedly influence the translation process and product (17). Adding to this discussion, Lawrence Venuti writes about the ‘invisibility’ of the translator and the factors contributing to this invisibility. Among these are issues of authorship and domestication of texts, as well as underappreciation for translators’ work in the book industry (6-11). He writes that translators’ work is essentially mediating between cultures and walks of life and that it possibly affects political and social dynamics, such as discrimination and war (14). Translation is evidently crucial in global situations like war and natural disasters, and therefore during a global pandemic, too. It is essential that translators are given a voice and understood in order to ensure adequate international communication, whether it be slowly through literature, or immediately through news or conferences.

Another angle from which to study the translator and the translation process is ergonomic, i.e. environmental – focusing directly on the more immediate context of the workplace of the translator (rather than the broader socio-cultural context). This type of translation research investigates how the environments in which translators work affect their process, concentration and output. It has been stated that disturbances, such as sounds, lights and an over-use of technological tools can negatively impact the translation process (Ehrensberger-Dow & Hunziker Heeb 84). The same research suggests that an increased understanding of the importance of the ergonomics of the work environment and increased efforts to optimise this, from both employers and translators, will result in more effective workspaces (Ehrensberger-Dow & Hunziker Heeb 85).

Based on these arguments, it is important to investigate changes in the environment of translators and with that the way translators handle such changes. Such empirical data it will make it possible to determine what kinds of environmental factors negatively, or positively, impact the translation process and the wellbeing of the translators. Given that the COVID-19

pandemic has, inevitably, led to changes in the working environment of all workers, also in the Netherlands, the impact of this on the work and wellbeing of translators require further investigation.

Lastly, the translator can be studied from a psychological framework. This framework includes several angles from which studies are conducted. As Jääskeläinen writes, psychology is cognition, affect, emotion and personality. She argues, based on several studies, that all this affects the translation process and product. The studies that are mentioned indicate that the social psychological angle of Descriptive Translation Studies (as voiced by James S. Holmes) is a multidisciplinary one that can offer new and useful insights in the factors that affect the translation process. Jääskeläinen states that changes in the process, logically, result in changes in the product. This viewpoint has taken some more root in TS over the years, but has not yet been applied in the context of a crisis in an empirical study.

For example, in *Translation in Cascading Crises*, psychology is mostly referred to in the context of risk perception (Federici & O'Brien 10) and miscommunication with interpreters and its effects on the situation (Bajaj 202-203). Once, it is mentioned that the psychological effects of crises can affect the quality of the output produced by translators (Al-Shehari 34). However, there is a call for research on the psychological effects of crises on T&Is (translators and interpreters). Federici and O'Brien write that psychological support is needed for both the locals and T&Is present (14).

However, as mentioned before, there is a lack of research on the effects psychological factors have on translators and translation processes in times of crisis. Besides, all of the previous research has been conducted in situations of war or natural disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic is relatively peaceful, yet heavily impactful, as illustrated in the introduction. Therefore, the psychological effects may be expected to be rather different, and need to be handled differently. In order to find out what the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on

translators' working conditions, experiences, and wellbeing are and how translators are handling the situation and what their worries are, it is crucial that they are given an opportunity to voice their concerns and that they are being listened to by the authorities responsible for supporting industries and those working in these industries.

## 2.2 Preliminary data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the translation industry

Anecdotal and preliminary survey data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the translation industry can be found on the internet. Surveys concerning the financial implications for language service providers and translation organisations have been distributed in China, as well as all over Europe (Wang, CEATL, FIT-Europe). Wang has concluded that over 70% of Language Service Providers in China had done crucial work in fighting the epidemic. LSPs work was already mostly online, but there has been a decline in business and most LSPs do not have sufficient financial buffers, so there are concerns about the future. Elsewhere, an initiative by FIT-Europe aims to survey translators all over the world in order to monitor changes in the industry, translators' stance on these changes, and how governments are handling the distribution of the crucial financial support. This on-going survey sheds light on the main concerns that translators find themselves facing during this crisis. These concerns are mainly financial, since most freelancers will only be able to financially support themselves for 1-3 months without work, and jobs have declined drastically, the surveys found. A second, more in-depth study by FIT-Europe showed that many translators would need government support to keep afloat, regardless of the fact that jobs had slowly been increasing again. CEATL gathered information from countries all over Europe, and found that the situation is being handled differently in most countries. In the Netherlands, the Auteursbond was lobbying for government help, but that no surveys about translators' personal situations had been distributed yet, and that many book releases and such had been cancelled and that therefore many freelance translators have seen a decline in jobs. It

also mentioned, however, that many translators have a part-time job and might therefore be able to sustain themselves for some time.

It is also important to shed some light on the psychological and sociological impact of the COVID-19 crisis on translators as well, and the existing surveys fail to investigate translators' personal situations regarding anything else but financial concerns. More in-depth information is necessary, however, for a company to construct a solid plan for improving conditions for working from home.

This paper focusses on the effects of the crisis on the translator. This study will focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work life of translators across two sectors of the industry in the Netherlands: literary and non-literary translation (meaning specialised forms of translation, for example medical or legal translation). The choice for this subdivision of the translation industry is motivated by the aim to investigate whether literary translation is affected differently from non-literary translation. In doing so, the survey will be able to offer insights on the effects of the pandemic on translators working in the book industry, as well as offer scope for investigating medical and legal translation, which are most likely to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, since these are the areas which are most crucial in times of crises, when governments need to implement new rules and restrictions and medical findings need to be shared worldwide as fast as possible. In so doing this study will aim to gain insights in the experiences of translators in two vastly different areas of the industry during this pandemic, and determine whether there are any differences between how translators working in these areas are affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

No research on the effects of crises on translators and their jobs has been done in the Netherlands, as of the time of writing. There is thus a gap in translation research, that this study aims to fill.

### 3. Research questions

Against the background presented in the previous sections, the main research question that informs this study is: What are the effects of the Covid-19 health pandemic resulting in mandatory isolation on the work experiences of literary and non-literary translators in the Netherlands? This main question has five sub-questions:

- Are the text types/translation jobs that translators receive affected by the pandemic? If so, how are they affected? An accompanying matter is whether the rate of pay has changed. How do the translators handle these changes?
- Has the amount of work pressure increased? If so, has this affected output and self-confidence?
- Are translators able to connect with colleagues and support each other?
- Has the work method of translators changed as a consequence of these developments? If so, how has this impacted their output and wellbeing?
- Across all these different dimensions, are there differences in the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on literary translators compared to non-literary translators in the Netherlands?

### 4. Hypotheses

Based on the anecdotal and survey data already available (Wang, CEATL, FIT-Europe), the hypotheses are as follows:

- Text types and translation jobs will have changed for non-literary translators, but not for literary translators.
- Only freelance translators will have experienced a change in pay rate, depending on the amount of jobs they are able to do.
- The amount of pressure will have increased for both literary and non-literary translators.

- No hypothesis can be formulated on how translators handle these changes, how they stay in contact with colleagues, how they tackle their jobs, and whether there is a difference between impact on literary vs. non-literary translators, since no research/anecdotal data is available on this topic.

## 5. Method

### 5.1 General methodological approach

To gain insights in people's experiences and attitudes, two main methods of data collection are available: surveys/questionnaires, and interviews. The main motivation for using a questionnaire rather than doing in-depth interviews is the impracticality of interviews in light of quarantine. An interview over Skype (without good interviewing skills) will most likely not produce reliable data. A questionnaire is more feasible, and in addition, with an online questionnaire a large sample of translators can be reached, thus yielding more generalisable findings.

However, a questionnaire has some serious drawbacks. These are mostly due to the superficial nature of a questionnaire (Saldanha and O'Brien 153). Therefore, the data is most often largely exploratory and hardly explanatory (152). In order to work with this superficiality, this questionnaire contained open questions as well (see section 5.3). However, since it is an online questionnaire the responses were not as in-depth as they would have been were the questions asked in a personal interview.

### 5.2 Respondents

The respondents were literary and non-literary (medical, legal, administrative, etc.) translators working in the Netherlands, primarily working in language combinations in which they translate into Dutch. Potential respondents fitting this profile were reached by emailing organisations that employ/work with translators working in these branches. These organisations included Expertise Centrum Literair Vertalen and Business Translation

Services. These organisations were selected as a sampling frame, since there is no comprehensive database of translators from which to sample participants. A list of the selected organisations can be found in the appendix.

The goal was to recruit 30 respondents, ideally 15 literary translators and 15 non-literary translators. Ultimately, 132 respondents completed the questionnaire.

### 5.3 Questionnaire design

In order to make the questionnaire as efficient and easy to fill in as possible, the questionnaire was made to be no longer than necessary, clear, accompanied by clear instruction and a warning about relatively personal questions (Saldanha and O'Brien 166). The participants were explicitly asked to express their personal experiences, and not to say what they think is expected of them (Van Dam & Zethsen *Danish company* 79). The questionnaire was also fully anonymous.

The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms, a platform that most people will be familiar with since it is free to operate and offers many useful features. It was estimated that the questionnaire would take between 10 and 20 minutes to complete, depending on how elaborately the respondent chose to respond.

The questionnaire was divided into sections and started with demographic questions, followed by experiential questions. The sections were as follows: work pressure and interaction with colleagues, translation jobs and text types, work method, the translation field in general and final thoughts.

The questionnaire contains a variety of open and closed questions, making it possible to analyse some responses statistically, and then to consider these statistics in light of the elaborations offered by the respondents. The closed questions were all yes-no questions, except for the personal background information or questions that asked whether a certain effect was positive or negative. Based on the reply to the closed questions, the questionnaire

continued on to more in depth open questions about the same issue, or skipped to the next question. All yes-no questions are mandatory, except for those that were part of the more in-depth sections after a mandatory closed question, but the open questions could be skipped.

Before the final questionnaire was sent to the selected organisations, a pilot study was conducted. Two translators filled out the questionnaire and commented on its contents and setup. Based on the feedback, a few minor changes were made, which improved the overall structure of questionnaire, which in turn made it more accessible and easy to complete. The questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

#### 5.4 Questionnaire distribution

The respondents were reached by emailing the questionnaire, accompanied by an explanatory cover letter, to translation organisations or organisations that employ translators included in the sampling frame, with the request that they send it to their translators. This way the translators knew that their employers/organisations approve of them participating, which might have increased response rate (as unsolicited direct requests often result in low response rates) (Saldanha & O'Brien 167). An online link to the questionnaire was attached in the email.

The questionnaire was first distributed on 15 May 2020, and remained open until 29 May 2020.

#### 5.5 Data analysis

The questionnaire data was analysed statistically, using SPSS, and qualitatively.

The statistical analysis made use of descriptive statistics and crosstabulations, with the significance of the relationship between categorical variables tested by means of chi-square tests. The descriptive statistics were used to find any trends in the respondents' responses to the closed questions. The frequency of 'yes' and 'no' responses indicated the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on translators in broad terms. Some closed questions asked the

respondents to indicate whether certain effects were positive or negative, and based on the frequency of these responses it was determined what sort of effects the pandemic mostly has.

Afterwards, the responses to the open questions were analysed in light of the statistical findings of the closed questions. Through these open questions, more explicit, individualised and nuanced data on the effects of the pandemic was gathered and so explained in some detail. Per open question, the core of the responses was noted by identifying key words which were used to define general trends in the responses. Over and above these general trends, unique answers or detailed answers were noted separately when they provided extra insight. This analysis is loosely based on the method used by van Dam and Zethsen (*Helpers and opponents*).

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Respondent statistics

Of the 132 respondents 77 were 51 years or older (58.3%), 50 were between 31 and 50 years (37.9%), and 5 were 30 years or younger (3.8%). 81.8% of the respondents was female, 16.7% was male and 1.5% preferred not to say. Table 1 shows details about the respondents' employment and general specialisation.

Table 1

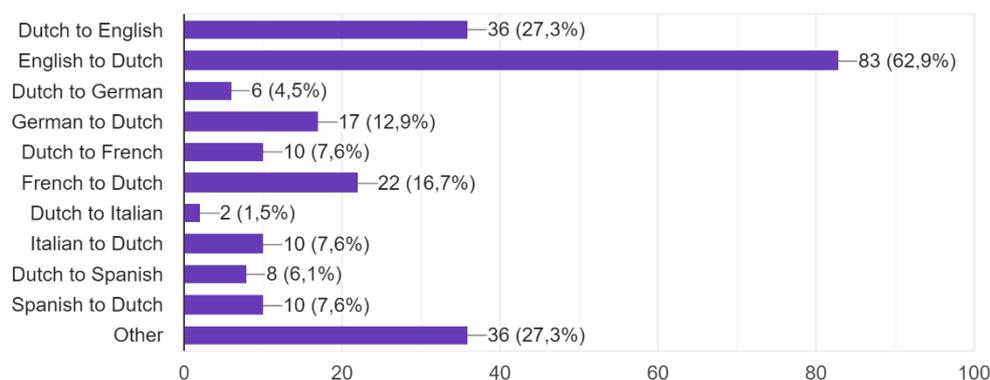
*Numbers of freelance and employed translators, categorised by their general field of specialisation. (N = total of respondents. n = number of respondents in specific category)*

| Respondents<br>(N=132) | Freelance<br>(n=128) |                |                        | Employed<br>(n=4) |               |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
|                        | Female<br>(n=106)    | Male<br>(n=20) | Not<br>stated<br>(n=2) | Female<br>(n=2)   | Male<br>(n=2) |
| Literary<br>(n=34)     | 27                   | 7              | 0                      | 0                 | 0             |
| Non-literary<br>(n=81) | 68                   | 9              | 0                      | 2                 | 2             |
| Both<br>(n=17)         | 11                   | 4              | 2                      | 0                 | 0             |

Diagram 1 below shows the possible language pairs that the respondents work with. The respondents could select up to three language pairs, which is why the total number of selections is more than 132. As diagram 1 shows, most translators translate from English to Dutch (62.9%). An equal number translate from Dutch to English as work in another, unlisted language pair (both 27.3%). 16.7% of the respondents translate from French to Dutch and 12.9% translate from German to Dutch. The other language pairs were selected less than 10% of the time. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that most of the data presented in this study is most relevant for translators working from English to Dutch, Dutch to English, French to Dutch and German to Dutch.

Diagram 1

*Numbers and percentages of language pairs the respondents work in*



Considering the fact that there were 132 respondents ultimately, it can be argued that this sample population is fairly representative of the total population of translators in the Netherlands.

## 6.2 Work pressure

This section addressed questions considering work pressure and self-confidence. The aim was to determine whether translators have experienced any changes as a consequence of the COVID-19 situation. Table 2 shows the results of the questions, which were as follows:

- Have you experienced an increase in work pressure since the Covid-19 pandemic hit?
- Please elaborate on how this increase in pressure has come about.
- How do you handle this increase in pressure?
- Have you experienced a change in your self-confidence with regard to your job?

- Was this change positive or negative?
- Has this change affected your output?

Table 2<sup>1</sup>

*Percentile data of responses to questions about work pressure and self-confidence, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Increase in work pressure (%) |      | Change in self-confidence (%) |      | Change positive or negative (%) |          |         | Change affected output (%) |      |         |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|----------|---------|----------------------------|------|---------|
|                     | Yes                           | No   | Yes                           | No   | Positive                        | Negative | Missing | Yes                        | No   | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 11.8                          | 88.2 | 11.8                          | 88.2 | 0.00                            | 11.8     | 88.2    | 8.8                        | 2.9  | 88.2    |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 16.0                          | 84.0 | 16.0                          | 84.0 | 4.9                             | 11.1     | 84.0    | 6.2                        | 9.9  | 84.0    |
| Both (n=17)         | 17.6                          | 82.4 | 5.9                           | 94.1 | 0.00                            | 5.9      | 94.1    | 5.9                        | 0.00 | 94.1    |

The distribution of the responses to ‘increase in work pressure’ was not significantly different among the specialisations ( $\chi^2(2) = .437$ ;  $p = .804$ ). The distribution for ‘change in self-confidence’ was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.37$ ;  $p = .504$ ). This means that the number of translators experiencing self-confidence changes and consequent effects is roughly equal among the specialisations. Overall, the majority of translators (more than 80% across all groups) did not experience an increase in work pressure or a change in self-confidence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is hardly a difference in change in work pressure between literary and non-literary translators. Literary translators indicate that big projects are postponed or cancelled, which results in pressure. Of the translators who indicated that they had experienced an increase in pressure, non-literary translators working in the medical and economic field have stated that there are tighter deadlines. Others again have said that they accept more jobs than usual, in order to build up a financial buffer. Translators were also asked to describe how they

<sup>1</sup> Some of the closed questions and all of the open questions could be skipped, that is why sometimes the percentages do not add up to 100% percent. Only the closed questions that were necessary to determine whether the respondent would have to skip certain sections of the questionnaire based on their answer were mandatory. Others could be skipped at will.

handle the increase in pressure. Most translators said they work more hours, but also that those hours might be less efficient. When translators have more free time due to a lack of jobs, they use this time to practise more hobbies or get more exercise. Some indicated that this also helps them destress. A quote that neatly summarises the general sentiment is the following: “[I handle the increase in work pressure] by planning my working week well and trying to work ahead where possible, while also taking some time off whenever possible”.

### 6.3 Interaction with colleagues

Table 3 shows the results of questions that investigated how the pandemic has affected interaction with colleagues. The questions were as follows:

- Are you able to connect with colleagues while working at home?
- Are you able to support your colleagues?
- Are you able to receive support from your colleagues?
- If you support each other, please elaborate on how.

Table 3  
*Percentile data of responses to questions about connection with colleagues, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Connect with colleagues (%) |      |          | Give support (%) |      | Receive support (%) |      |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------|----------|------------------|------|---------------------|------|
|                     | Yes                         | No   | The Same | Yes              | No   | Yes                 | No   |
| Literary (n=34)     | 64.7                        | 0.00 | 35.5     | 88.2             | 11.8 | 85.3                | 11.8 |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 49.4                        | 1.2  | 49.4     | 75.3             | 22.2 | 74.1                | 23.5 |
| Both (n=17)         | 35.5                        | 0.00 | 64.7     | 76.5             | 11.8 | 76.5                | 11.8 |

The Pearson Chi-square test was performed here as well. This test gave nonsignificant results for ‘connect with colleagues’, meaning that distribution was equal and there are no differences between the different groups of translation specialisation ( $\chi^2 (4) = 4.89$ ;  $p = .299$ ). There were also no differences found between the general specialisations for ‘give support’ and ‘receive support’, ( $\chi^2 (2) = 2.22$ ;  $p = .329$ ) and ( $\chi^2 (2) = 2.53$ ;  $p = .282$ ) respectively.

This means that translators of all of the specialisations were able to connect with colleagues and give and receive support equally. Over 60% of the literary translators was able to connect with their colleagues. Meanwhile, there is a near 50/50 split for the non-literary

translators between being able to connect and the connection having remained the same. For over 60% of translators in both specialisations the connection with colleagues has remained the same. Regarding the relatively large percentages of translators for whom the amount of contact with colleagues has remained the same, a likely inference is that since most of the respondents were freelance translators, their contact levels were already online and on the lower end of the spectrum, and therefore a change here is an unlikely consequence of the pandemic. Overall, the majority in the groups (at least 70%) was able to give and receive support to and from colleagues.

The data shows that both literary, non-literary and translators working in both fields are able to connect with colleagues and give and receive support to the same degree, there is no difference between the groups.

The qualitative results show that many translators use email and Facebook to share experiences and chat about the projects they're working on. They either support each other emotionally and motivationally, or professionally. They are offering advice on translations or PR and give feedback. Some translators indicated that they passed on jobs for which they don't have the time to colleagues who don't receive as many jobs. The emotional support consists mostly of humorous exchanges, chatting casually and talking about personal situations and offer compassion and solidarity. Most translators who offer professional and motivational advice remain professional, and those who give emotional support tend to offer professional support as well. There seem to be translators who are closer to their colleagues than others are. Some who do not connect emotionally with colleagues mentioned that they did do so with friends and other loved ones. The most common means of communication seem to be email, Facebook, Zoom and forums. The following quotes illustrate the trend nicely: "We have a network on FB where we talk about all kinds of things, support each other, look out for work for colleagues who are out of work at the moment" and "The sharing of

experiences (lack of work primarily) on social media platforms helps translators to understand that they are not alone and that consequences are not personal”.

#### 6.4 Translation jobs and text types

This category focussed on whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had any impact on the kinds of translation jobs and the text types commissioned. The Table 4 summarises the responses to the questions, which were as follows:

- Has there been a change in the kind of translation jobs that you receive/accept since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Please elaborate on what has changed.
- Please explain why you think the jobs have changed.
- Has there been a change in the amount of jobs that you receive/accept?
- Has the amount of jobs that you receive/accept increased or decreased?
- Please explain why you think this number has changed.
- Has there been a change in the types of texts for translation jobs?
- Please explain what has changed.
- Please explain why you think the types of texts have changed.

Table 4

*Percentile data of responses to questions about changes in translation jobs and text types, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Kind job change (%) |      |         | Number jobs change (%) |      |         | Number jobs increase/decrease (%) |          |         |
|---------------------|---------------------|------|---------|------------------------|------|---------|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|
|                     | Yes                 | No   | Missing | Yes                    | No   | Missing | Increase                          | Decrease | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 2.9                 | 88.2 | 8.8     | 26.5                   | 67.6 | 5.9     | 5.9                               | 20.6     | 73.5    |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 22.2                | 74.1 | 3.7     | 70.4                   | 27.2 | 2.5     | 12.3                              | 58.0     | 29.6    |
| Both (n=17)         | 23.5                | 64.7 | 11.2    | 58.8                   | 23.5 | 17.6    | 0.00                              | 58.8     | 41.2    |

|                     | Text type change (%) |      |         |
|---------------------|----------------------|------|---------|
|                     | Yes                  | No   | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 0.00                 | 91.2 | 8.8     |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 21.0                 | 75.3 | 3.7     |
| Both (n=17)         | 11.8                 | 76.5 | 11.8    |

The difference between job type and text type is that jobs can be larger or smaller, projects or just one-off jobs, whereas text types are the (literary or business) genre of the text, or its topic.

The chi-square test for 'kind job change' was significant, meaning that the distribution within the specialisations differed ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.53$ ;  $p = .038$ ). The data in Table 4 shows that non-literary translators (22.2%) and translators of both (23.5%) have experienced changes to the kinds of jobs received to a greater degree than have the literary translators (2.9%) (for whom the profile of jobs received has remained largely the same). 26.5% of literary translators have experienced a change in the number of jobs, and 20.6% of the total of literary translators indicated that this was a decrease. On the other hand, 70.4% of non-literary translators and 58.8% of translators of both have indicated a change in the number of jobs, and only non-literary translators experienced an increase (12.3%). This means that whenever a change in the number of jobs was experienced by a translator, it was most likely a decrease. The chi-square for 'text type change' was significant and thus the distribution of response-kind within one specialisation was significantly different from the other specialisations ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.17$ ;  $p = .017$ ). Literary translators clearly did not experience a change in text-types received for translation (91.2%); however, non-literary translators (21.0%) (and translators in both groups, 11.8%) to some degree did.

The analysis above shows that significantly more non-literary translators and translators of both literature and non-literary texts experienced changes in text types and the amount of jobs than literary translators. The, perhaps obvious, most frequent change was that the majority of texts now handled COVID-19 in one way or another. The non-literary fields relevant to the pandemic, mainly medical and economic, experienced mostly an increase in jobs. Other fields saw a decline, mostly for museums, tourism companies and courts. This is illustrated by the following quote by one of the respondents: "Far fewer orders, orders postponed. Fewer press releases and new product texts, more texts informing staff/managers

about Covid-19 measures. More work from a client in the travel sector providing guarantees due to the effect on the tourism industry”. Most translators indicated that they thought this change came about due to the logical consequences of the pandemic when many/most of their clients are out of work, and thus the translators as well. The same is true for literary translators, who saw a decline in jobs as well.

There was no difference between the groups for the percentage of translators who saw a decline in jobs. Literary translators indicate that translation projects have been postponed or cancelled, mostly because bookstores were closed and sold fewer books, and as a consequence bought fewer books, which made publishers cautious and prone to postponing projects. Many book-festivals have been cancelled as well, so projects tied to those festivals were cancelled too. The following quote describes the general trend nicely: “The plan was I was going to translate a certain book, but because of the crisis the publisher isn't sure anymore if he wants to publish it (and have it translated)”.

On the other hand, some translators had actually experienced an increase in jobs. These were mostly non-literary translators who work in specialisations relevant to the pandemic.

### 6.5 Translation rates and pay

This section sought to determine whether translators had experienced a change in rates of pay, and if so whether it had been an increase or a decrease. The specific questions were:

- Have you experienced a change in pay rates since the COVID-19 pandemic hit?
- Has the change in pay rates been an increase or decrease?

The chi-square for ‘pay rate change’ was significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.42$ ;  $p = .040$ ). Again, the all literary translators indicated no change in rate of pay; some non-literary translators (12.3%) did. Most translators who have experienced this change, have found it to be a decrease.

Table 5  
*Percentile data of responses to questions about pay rate changes, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Pay rate change (%) |      |         | Pay rate increase/decrease (%) |          |         |
|---------------------|---------------------|------|---------|--------------------------------|----------|---------|
|                     | Yes                 | No   | Missing | Increase                       | Decrease | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 0.00                | 91.2 | 8.8     | 0.00                           | 0.00     | 100     |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 12.3                | 84.0 | 3.7     | 1.2                            | 11.1     | 87.7    |
| Both (n=17)         | 0.00                | 88.2 | 11.8    | 0.00                           | 0.00     | 100     |

These findings show that, possibly, despite a decrease in the number of jobs, the rates paid per job have not decreased for literary translators (yet), but they have for a little over a tenth of the non-literary translators. There was no qualitative questions to further explore this issue.

#### 6.6 Work method

This section asked the respondents to indicate whether the factors talked about above had affected their work method and if so, if and how it has impacted their output. The questions were:

- Have you noticed a difference in how you approach your work/assignments since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Please elaborate on what has changed in your work method.
- Has this change impacted your output positively or negatively?
- Please explain your answer to the previous question.
- Please explain what factors you think have caused this change in your work method. Are these factors affecting you in any other way? (i.e. mentally, emotionally, physically, etc.?) (for example: are you more stressed out or easily irritated, do you get less exercise?)
- Please elaborate on how these factors are affecting you personally.

See Table 6 for the results.

The chi-square for ‘change work approach’ was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(2) = 5.97$ ;  $p = .051$ ), though approaching significance. Overall, across the three groups, between 23% and 53% of respondents indicated that the pandemic had affected their work approach.

Interestingly, the distribution between the positive and negative impact is surprisingly equal. The qualitative data shows how different translators experience the change differently.

Table 6  
*Percentile data of responses to questions about work method changes, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Change work approach (%) |      |         | Impact change work approach (%) |          |         | Personal changes (%) |      |         |
|---------------------|--------------------------|------|---------|---------------------------------|----------|---------|----------------------|------|---------|
|                     | Yes                      | No   | Missing | Positive                        | Negative | Missing | Yes                  | No   | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 29.4                     | 70.6 | 0.00    | 11.8                            | 14.7     | 73.5    | 17.6                 | 8.8  | 73.5    |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 23.5                     | 76.5 | 0.00    | 8.6                             | 13.6     | 77.8    | 18.5                 | 3.7  | 77.8    |
| Both (n=17)         | 52.9                     | 47.1 | 0.00    | 23.5                            | 29.5     | 47.1    | 41.2                 | 11.8 | 47.1    |

Of the translators who said the impact had been negative, most mentioned that it was harder to concentrate due to stress or family members, especially children, needing extra attention. As a consequence, regular working schedules were shaken up, which is hard to adapt to. Many experience motivational problems and pressure to meet deadlines. Others indicated that they work more hours and even during the weekends in order to stay on top of their work. The following quote demonstrates a clash between a negative effect, which resulted in positive actions being taken to work with the negative effect: “Sometimes it is hard to concentrate and focus as I used to be able to. So I take more time and implement more checks and review time to make sure the quality is up to par”.

On the other hand, a few translators indicated they experienced positive impact on their work approach from the pandemic. For example, some take more days off and get more exercise, they take it easy. Others indicated that they use this extra time to improve the quality of their work. For one translator their work is a link to normalcy and helps them keep it together.

Respondents were also asked whether this change has impacted their output, and how. Generally, there seem to be as many translators who say they get less work done as those who say they get more work done. Productivity levels really depend on the translators personality here, and whether they are used to working from home or not. Many experience lower levels

of output and struggle with unreasonable deadlines and stressed clients. Others take more time to work on assignments and so improve quality and quantity. The following quote offers some extra insight: “I take more time to complete a task, so this means lower productivity. But then again, the amount of work has decreased, so I can take all the time I need. Retaining clients is important, so spending more time on these tasks is OK”.

Lastly, in this section, respondents were asked whether they experience any other effects from the factors that have impacted their work approach. Again, there were negative and positive effects mentioned. The negative trend seemed to be that a large number of translators indicate that they are way more stressed than usual, are more easily irritated, get less exercise, worry about the future (family and financial) a lot. Many translators indicate they're feeling depressed. This really needs to be addressed. Stressed and depressed translators need all the extra support they can get. Therefore it might be useful for translation agencies to offer courses on healthy coping strategies or refer to places where their member can find such information.

On the positive side there are however some translators who indicate that they get more exercise and me-time and are able to relax. This number is rather small compared to the number of translators indicating they experience more stress, however.

### 6.7 Translation field in general

This section of the questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate whether they have noticed a change in the translation field in general and whether this change has impacted them personally as well. The questions were:

- Have you noticed a change in the translation field of your specialisation in general since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Please elaborate on what has changed.
- Have these changes affected you personally in any way?
- Please elaborate on how these changes have affected you personally.

Table 7 summarises the findings.

Table 7

*Percentile data of responses to questions about the translation field in general, categorised by general specialisation*

|                     | Change translation field (%) |      |         | Personal effect of that change (%) |      |         |
|---------------------|------------------------------|------|---------|------------------------------------|------|---------|
|                     | Yes                          | No   | Missing | Yes                                | No   | Missing |
| Literary (n=34)     | 35.3                         | 64.7 | 0.00    | 14.7                               | 85.3 | 0.00    |
| Non-literary (n=81) | 27.2                         | 71.6 | 1.2     | 27.2                               | 71.6 | 1.2     |
| Both (n=17)         | 29.4                         | 70.6 | 0.00    | 35.3                               | 64.7 | 0.00    |

The chi-square for ‘change translation field’ was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(2) = .694$ ;  $p = .707$ ). Each specialisation has a roughly equal number of translators who have noticed a change in the translation field in general – roughly 30% of respondents, though, interestingly, this percentage is highest for literary translators. The chi-square for ‘personal effect of that change’ was nonsignificant as well ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.13$ ;  $p = .209$ ). The number of translators who are affected by the change in the translation field is roughly the same among the specialisations; however, here somewhat different trends emerge. Even though literary translators are more likely to suggest that there are or will be changes in the literary field, they are less likely to see this as having impact on their own work (14% of respondents). In contrast, nearly double as many respondents from the non-literary (or combined) work profiles saw the changes in the field as potentially having consequences for their own work environment.

The interesting trend described above is probably an effect of the expectation that the change for the literary translators will be longer down the road, since publishers and bookstores are probably affected in the long-term. Besides, despite the fact that most respondents did not see a change, it has become clear that at least some translators have seen a clear trend in literary projects being postponed or cancelled already. Some translators mentioned this being due to bookstores buying fewer books and publishers as a consequence publisher fewer books which leads to fewer literary translation projects.

Additionally, it was mentioned that due to museums and restaurants being closed the number of jobs has dwindled. On the other hand, jobs in fields relevant to the pandemic have increased. This is mostly not new information. Non-literary translators had indicated earlier in the questionnaire that most change has occurred in the topic of the texts and the number of jobs. The effects of the changes in the translation field in general have also already mostly been described in the previous sections. This sections has proven to be rather repetitive.

## 7. Conclusions

This study aimed to determine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on translators in the Netherlands and their work, and whether these effects were different for literary as opposed to non-literary translators. The quantitative analysis shows that in most areas there is no difference between literary and non-literary translators.

Firstly, more than 80% across all groups (literary, non-literary, both) did not experience an increase in work pressure. Those who did, indicated that this change was negative and affected their output, there was no difference among the groups. The qualitative analysis shows that overall, it is harder to find jobs and that as a consequence translators experience more stress.

Secondly, the majority of translators could connect with colleagues, or this connection remained the same as before the pandemic, and over 74% across all groups could give and receive support, there was no difference among the groups. The qualitative analysis shows that this support is both motivationally, mentally and professionally and that translators use all kinds of digital platforms to this end, but mostly Facebook and email.

Then, job and text types had changed only for the non-literary and combined translators, the difference here was significant. What this means is that the kinds of literature that is being translated and the type of projects had not changed, while the texts in non-literary jobs have changed. The qualitative data shows that the main change was that many non-

literary texts now concern the pandemic in one way or another. Besides, whereas only a fifth of the literary translators saw a decrease in jobs, over half (58%) of the non-literary and combined translators saw a decrease. This is due to non-literary translators' clients being in unstable situations due to COVID-19. However, literary translators indicated that they expected there to be a more significant drop in jobs later, since the book industry is likely to feel the effects further down the line.

Next, pay rates were investigated. Only non-literary translators indicated they had experienced a change, and nearly all experienced a decrease. There is no qualitative data to further explore this issue.

As far as work method is concerned, there was no significant difference among the groups. However, between 23% and 53% of translators per category said to have experienced a change in work approach. This change was nearly equally positive as negative. The negative impact seems largely to be lower levels of productivity and working more hours in order to make up for that. However, some positive changes included feeling more relaxed and taking more time for revision.

Lastly, regarding the translation field in general, between 27% and 35% of respondents indicated they had noticed a change. This shows that the pandemic has had quite an impact so far, which is only likely to grow in the future. The qualitative data here was mostly a repetition of what had been discussed in earlier sections, and regarded the shift in attention of the field to the pandemic as well as a dwindling of the number of jobs available.

The data shows an ambiguity: some translators experience negative effects and others positive effects. Many translators who did not experience negative effects are now being heard for the first time. At first they were not heard because they did not have anything to complain about, so now, for the first time, the positive/neutral effects are being reported. It also shows that anecdotal data is only part of the picture. This larger dataset shows that there

are only certain areas where negative effects were experienced, and not all translators experienced these. Individual experiences differ and not all translators want/need support. Individuals need different kinds of support. These data show how complex the issue really is.

Based on these findings, it can be said that it is necessary for translators in a crisis situation like this to receive support in acquiring jobs, mental support and tips as to how to maintain a regular working schedule in order to not get lost in the uncertainty that accompanies a crisis. Translation agencies, translation bureaus and translation organisations could work towards acquiring information of this kind and provide online support for their translators who need it. Most organisations have newsletters through which information can be spread easily, and thus helpful and supportive messages, tips, online chatrooms, etc. as well.

A few suggestions for future research can be made based on the results and discussion sections above. A follow-up study could investigate how the effects experienced by the translators could be relieved through support from other translators and their agencies. Further studies could also address means of how to support translators in being able to continue their work with the same quality of output and same love and motivation for their work as they used to have before the crisis occurred. One of the possible questions that could be addressed are as follows: what actions need to be undertaken by translator organisations to support their translators in times of crisis? Maybe psychologists and/or courses on working from home need to be made available.

Besides, as mentioned in the theoretical background, Translation Studies is angling towards a more interdisciplinary approach on all fronts. This study is multidisciplinary in some sense, since it aims to investigate psychological aspects of a sudden change in society, a health pandemic, which affects translators as well. However, the background knowledge needed for a fully comprehensible study into the psychological aspects, instead of just

superficially, is lacking. Therefore a suggestion for future research is for researchers to work on this topic with researchers from different fields and combine efforts.

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## Appendix

### A. Schedule

| <b>When</b> | <b>What</b>  |
|-------------|--|
| Week 1      | Send in proposal for approval<br>Broaden theoretical background<br>Start setting up questionnaire  |
| Week 2      | Broaden theoretical background<br>Continue questionnaire<br>Send in questionnaire for approval<br>(feedback moment 1 – proposal and questionnaire)                     |
| Week 3      | Pilot questionnaire<br>Continue theoretical background   |
| Week 4      | Continue theoretical background<br>Pilot questionnaire<br>Revise questionnaire<br>Send out questionnaire to agencies   |
| Week 5      | Continue theoretical background<br>Start compiling data in excel and SPSS<br>Send in revised method and start of analysis<br>(feedback moment 2 – method and analysis) |
| Week 6      | Continue theoretical background<br>Data collection was finished  |
| Week 7      | Continue theoretical background<br>Start analysis<br>Write results   |
| Week 8      | Continue analysis<br>Continue results  |
| Week 9      | Finish analysis<br>Finish results<br>Write conclusion<br>Hand in pre-final   |
| Week 10     | Feedback moment 3<br>Revise and incorporate feedback   |
| Week 11     | Revise and incorporate feedback<br>Hand in final version on July 3 <sup>rd</sup>   |

### B. List of organisations

| <b>Organisation/translator</b>      | <b>Branch of translation</b>  |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Expertise Centrum Literair Vertalen | Literary                      |
| The Language Lab                    | Juridical, medical, technical |
| Taalcentrum Vrije Universiteit      | Financial, literary           |
| Business Translation Services       | Legal                         |
| NGTV                                | Literary and non-literary     |
| Nederlands Letterenfonds            | Literary                      |

### C. Questionnaire

Dear translator,

This questionnaire aims to gain an understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the translation industry and translators in the Netherlands, focussing on literary and non-literary translators. It is part of my BA research project in the Department of Languages, Literature and Communication at Utrecht University, under the supervision of Prof. dr. Haidee Kotze and Dr. Gys-Walt van Egdom.

The questionnaire asks questions about changes in how you work, what kinds of assignments you receive, and how you personally experience the situation in relation to your work. There are also questions about shifts that you perceive in your field of work in general, whether that has affected you personally in any way, and if so, how.

The questionnaire asks some personal questions, like your field of specialisation, your working languages, your gender and your age. This is necessary since the study will compare the experiences of translators working in different fields of specialisation, and needs to correlate respondent population statistics with findings. However, the data from the questionnaire will be kept fully anonymous, and you can skip any open questions you do not wish to answer.

You are kindly asked to base your responses solely on your personal experiences, and to avoid giving responses based on anyone else's views.

The questionnaire will take 15-20 minutes to complete.  
You can write your responses in English or in Dutch.

I sincerely thank you in advance, and hope you stay well.  
Tess Masselink

P.S. The deadline is Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May.

#### **Background information**

1. What is your gender? \*
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Prefer not to say
  - d. Other
2. What is your age? \*
  - a. <30
  - b. 31-50
  - c. >51
3. Do you primarily work as a freelancer or are you employed by a company? \*
  - a. Freelance
  - b. Employed by a company
4. Do you specialise in literary or non-literary translation? \*
  - a. Literary (goes to question 5)
  - b. Non-literary (goes to question 6)
  - c. Both (goes to question 7)

5. Please list the genres which you mostly work with in literary translation.
6. Which of the following subjects do you specialise in?
  - a. Legal
  - b. Medical
  - c. Administrative
  - d. Journalistic
  - e. Other
7. Please describe what type of text you typically work with.
8. Which language pair(s) do you specialise in? Choose a maximum of three language combinations you work in most frequently. \*
  - a. Dutch to English
  - b. English to Dutch
  - c. Dutch to French
  - d. French to Dutch
  - e. Dutch to German
  - f. German to Dutch
  - g. Dutch to Italian
  - h. Italian to Dutch
  - i. Dutch to Spanish
  - j. Spanish to Dutch
  - k. Other

#### **Work pressure and interaction with colleagues**

9. Have you experienced an increase in work pressure since the Covid-19 pandemic hit? \*
  - a. Yes (goes next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 12)
10. Please elaborate on how this increase in pressure has come about.
11. How do you handle this increase in pressure?
12. Have you experienced a change in your self-confidence with regard to your job? \*
  - a. Yes (goes next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 15)
13. Was this change positive or negative?
  - a. Positive
  - b. Negative
14. Has this change affected your output?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
15. Are you able to connect with colleagues while working at home? \*
  - a. Yes
  - b. No (skips to question 19)
  - c. The same
16. Are you able to support your colleagues?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
17. Are you able to receive support from your colleagues?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
18. If you support each other, please elaborate on how.

### **Translation jobs and text types**

19. Has there been a change in the kind of translation jobs that you receive/accept since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 22)
20. Please elaborate on what has changed.
21. Please explain why you think the jobs have changed.
22. Has there been a change in the amount of jobs that you receive/accept? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 25)
23. Has the amount of jobs that you receive/accept increased or decreased?
  - a. Increased
  - b. Decreased
24. Please explain why you think this number has changed.
25. Has there been a change in the types of texts for translation jobs? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 27)
26. Please explain what has changed.
27. Please explain why you think the types of texts have changed.
28. Have you experienced a change in pay rates since the Covid-19 pandemic hit? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 30)
29. Has the change in pay rates been an increase or decrease?
  - a. Increase
  - b. Decrease

### **Work method**

30. Have you noticed a difference in how you approach your work/assignments since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 37)
31. Please elaborate on what has changed in your work method.
32. Has this change impacted your output positively or negatively?
  - a. Positively
  - b. Negatively
33. Please explain your answer to the previous question.
34. Please explain what factors you think have caused this change in your work method. Are these factors affecting you in any other way? (i.e. mentally, emotionally, physically, etc.?) (for example: are you more stressed out or easily irritated, do you get less exercise?)
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 27)
35. Please elaborate on how these factors are affecting you personally.

### **The translation field in general**

36. Have you noticed a change in the translation field of your specialisation in general since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic? \*
  - a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 40)
37. Please elaborate on what has changed.

38. Have these changes affected you personally in any way? \*
- a. Yes (goes to next question)
  - b. No (skips to question 40)
39. Please elaborate on how these changes have affected you personally.

**Final thoughts**

40. Is there anything you wish to add, about any aspect of your experience as a translator working during the Covid-19 pandemic?

15 minutes

10 seconds for closed questions, 60 seconds for open questions.  
23 closed questions, 18 open ones.