Report from TA Co-Chairs 2023

Membership

Translators Association membership: 899 (+54 on November 2022)
Associates: 137
Members: 762
TA membership is 7.2% of all SoA membership

Who are we and what do we do?

The aim of the TA is to advocate for the rights and needs of literary translators – a literary translator being anyone translating literary texts, such as fiction and non-fiction, children’s literature, but also academic writing, graphic novels, plays, screenplays and anything else that requires the skills and expertise of a literary translator. You can also join the TA as an emerging literary translator.

The activities of the Committee vary in response to issues raised by the wider TA community, and the particular skills and interests of committee members. As such, a considerable amount of time and thought has been given to developing and improving diversity and inclusivity in both the TA and the SoA. A working group was set up last year to continue this work, which has been meeting 3-monthly. The working group has been taking inspiration from our American sister organisation ALTA’s BIPOC caucus with plans to set up a Slack channel, in addition to the already existing Discord channel for neurodivergent translators.

A previous working groups on theatre translation, with the aim of developing a guide for translators wanting to access this particular branch of translation, has resulted in Catherine Fuller’s ongoing work on the topic, including a talk at Kings College London in July 2023 and a podcast planned for spring 2023. Catherine also gave a talk on contracts as part of BristolTranslate Summer School in July 2023.

The Committee aims to be a safe space for discussion where all members can share their experiences and concerns. The agenda helps to structure the discussion with regular items and space to discuss other topics raised by members.

The TA Committee

The committee has 8 elected members who serve for three years from the AGM in November. The committee appoints two members as Co-Chairs who serve for two years each, with a one-year overlap – meaning that no new co-chairing team has to start from scratch. The current Co-Chairs are Vineet Lal and Ian Giles, with previous Co-Chair Rebecca DeWald stepping down in November 2023. The TA is a member of CEATL (the European Council of Literary Translators Associations) and the current representative is a co-opted member of the TA committee. There are currently no other co-opted members.

Read more about the current committee here.

This is what the committee members say about why they joined the TA committee and what they are passionate about:
“I stood for the TA committee firstly, because I had relevant experience of serving in other Societies and I wanted to bring that to another organisation. Secondly, I’m passionate about the translator being recognised, being paid well, and finally ensuring that the text being translated is correct and of a very high standard.”

“Two areas particularly interest me: I would love to see more constructive conversations about the relationship between publishers and translators. And for all literary prizes awarded to translations to be shared (not necessarily equally) between the writer and the translator.”

“I joined the TAC as I felt it would be one of the most powerful means I had bring up issues of inclusivity and accessibility, and to work towards change in these areas.”

“Ensuring access to events for translators all around the country, hybrid and online attendance options, fair pay and bringing translators together to discuss terms to prevent publishers and agencies exploiting translators.”

“I wanted to learn more about how it works, and more importantly to make sure that the opinions/voices of other translators of colour were being heard.”

“I’m most passionate about getting more people involved, and increasing awareness of how we can support them. The rights of the translator (being assigned copyright, royalties, etc.) is something I really want to see improved.”

“I was initially asked and put forward by my Scandinavian colleagues initially. I felt that I wanted to give back something to the association that has helped me so much over the years. And also because I firmly believe in getting the best possible rights and contracts for translators, so that has always been my main focus. And have learnt so much in the past four years. Very grateful to have been part of the committee, even if it was a bit stressful at times.”

“I have been working as a professional translator for over a decade, but I still felt like an impostor when I first joined the Society of Authors, as most of my translation work is academic and non-fiction, with only a bit of fiction mixed in. But I’m glad colleagues and peers encouraged me to join the TA and the Committee, as it made me realize that translators can come in all different shapes and sizes, and they are all just as valid.”

How we work

Meetings are held quarterly; usually in February, May, September and November on a weekday for 2 hrs. All meetings are held online as the most accessible and inclusive way for members to meet. We recognise that meeting in person is also valuable so up to two meetings a year will also be hybrid, streamed from the SoA offices in London (committee members are reimbursed for travel expenses).

Most of our work is done in between meetings, when the committee stays in touch by email. Some emails will be for information only and others will be for action. The Co-Chairs and TA Co-ordinators will always tell committee members if a response is needed and give a clear deadline.

Statements, Campaigns and Advocacy

The committee’s focus in the past year coalesced around raising the profile of literary translators by highlighting the need for adequate remuneration and increasing the diversity and accessibility of the industry:
• The TA conducted a survey on payment and working conditions for bilingual Readers Reports for publishers last year and is continuing advocacy work around this, following an event on Readers Reports at last year’s TA@Home Festival. An article written by TA committee members Nichola Smalley and Clare Richards about why it matters to properly value readers’ reports was featured in the Summer 2023 edition of The Author.

• In the current year, much like the SoA as a whole, the TA has become increasingly concerned with issues around AI and what these technological developments in the book industry mean for translators. The TA has encouraged its members to share their experience – be they positive or negative – to gather evidence and feed into the wider SoA policy work. In addition to participating in a meeting about the use of AI in translation with Bookouture Deutschland SoA CEO Nicola Solomon, Co-Chair Rebecca DeWald gave a comment on the threat of AI for literary translators in The Times (February 2023), as well as on the theme of translation as an artform in The Guardian (July 2023) following the scandal ensuing from the British Museum’s unacknowledged use of Yilin Wang’s translation from the Chinese – a topic that further stresses the importance of the TA’s work on translators’ visibility (see #namethetranslator and #TranslatorsOnTheCover campaign for context).

• AI has been a strategic focus for the SoA in recent months, led by Nicola Solomon. The TA has been liaising closely with Nicola to ensure that the impact of AI on the translation world – both translator-side and publisher-side – is taken into consideration in this ever-important debate that affects working practices. At the last TA Committee meeting on 31 October it was agreed that a sub-group should be formed in order to progress this discussion in a cohesive and inclusive manner, and feed back to the SoA.

• To further our work in making the TA more accessible to potential committee members from more diverse backgrounds, we are also currently discussing the possibility of instating a honorarium for committee members, which would require a wider discussion by the SoA Management Committee as it would need to apply to all SoA groups. The honorarium discussion was raised via a TA paper presented at a recent SoA Man Comm meeting, and will be wrapped into the overarching review of groups that is currently underway (see below).

• Francesca Howell, Head of Author Communities at the SoA, is leading on a wide-ranging, consultative exercise designed to review and re-evaluate all of the various groups and networks associated with the SoA, including the TA. Francesca will open up the consultation with the Co-Chairs in late November 2023, aiming to report back in May 2024 (or earlier).

• One of the areas of most concern to the TA membership for some time had been the Find a Translator directory on the SoA website, which had not been functional for some time. A lot of work has gone into the redevelopment of
this area of the site, and the new search facility/translator profiles are now live: Find an author - The Society of Authors

- There has been considerable discussion and debate at the TA Committee around the issue of public statements of support and solidarity for translators who find themselves caught up in areas of conflict around the world, prompted by the current situation in the Middle East. A previous statement on the situation in Ukraine was made by the SoA in response to a specific request from the Writers’ Association there. The TA has approached the SoA to ascertain its position on such public statements and seek clarity on the policy for the future.

The Committee has been intentional about raising the profile of the Translator's Association on Twitter, using the hashtag #TAonTwitter. The social media representative is currently a rotating position, changing every three months. So far, it has only focused on Twitter, but future committee members can develop the role as they see fit, using other platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok to talk about translation issues. In addition to increasing visibility, the aim is to foster more conversations around translation where individuals feel they can bring issues to the committee to address at an organisational level. (eg: payment for book blog tours, etc.)

The role and work of the TA received some wonderful recognition through an article written by committee member Ian Giles for Counterpoint, CEATL e-zine. The article is available both in English and French on CEATL’s website.

Events

In November 2022, the TA planned and coordinated a successful TA@Home Festival, featuring 5 events, including a session on Readers Reports, a panel on Disability, Neurodiversity and Translation, and an Afternoon Tea with award-winning French and Spanish translator Frank Wynne. Two of the events were BSL interpreted and most heeded to the need for increased accessibility by featuring verbal descriptions of the speakers and a break before the Q&A. These events, including the informative role play on the Business of Translation, can be watched again on the SoA Vimeo channel.

The TA is one of a number of organisations on the Steering Group organising events each year at the London Book Fair’s Literary Translation Centre – one of the most attended stands at the LBF. The TA organized the sessions ‘Access and Accessibility in Translation: Who Gets to Translate – and Who Doesn’t?’ – the second most popular event at the LTC this year – directly linked to the committee’s ongoing work on access, and co-organized two events on the theme of money and payment in translation, ‘Money, Money, Money’ and ‘Gimme, Gimme, Gimme’, about the funding structures in translation publishing and translators’ remuneration. LBF had initially planned to use a silent theatre (headphones only) for the Literary Translation Centre, which we welcomed as it eases the participation of neurodivergent and disabled translators. After a change in plans, the steering group organised for a sound recording, meaning the LTC was the only stage that at least was partially recorded (unlike in previous years, none of the stages were recorded to watch again this year).

A couple of TA committee members attended the TA Translation Prizes ceremony in
London in February 2023. While the committee is not involved in coordinating the awards and selecting the winners, the ceremony is still a key celebration in any literary translator’s calendar.

The other stalwart feature in translators’ diaries is International Translation Day, held around St Jerome’s Day (30 September) each year. TA Co-Coordinator Ambre Morvan and translators Lawrence Schimel and Alex Zucker took part in a hybrid workshop about negotiating contracts as part of International Translation Day 2023 (29 September 2023), with many other past and present committee members also participating. The TA also organised a TA Lates, which was a success as well as a joint event on Poetry in Translation with the SoA Poetry and Spoken Word Group on 5 October.

We won’t be organising a TA@Home Festival this year as the committee realized that organizing a multitude of events, such as London Book Fair, takes up much of the committee’s time which is better spent advocating on translators’ behalf through other campaigns. However, an online Afternoon Tea with translator Sarah Death will be offered as a joint TA-BCLT event on the Scandinavian languages following our AGM this year.

November 2023