

Institutional translation

In brief



 SPA [Traducción institucional](#)

other names

Administrative translation, a term lacking precision but nevertheless used in university contexts, though not in the professional one. Institutional translation obviously shares some of its traits with legal translation..

abstract


Institutional translation is carried out in and for administrative entities, whether national or international, within the translation services. These are sometimes staffed by civil servants and sometimes by personnel with other types of employment relationship with the Administration.


The concept defines a professional context much more than a type of translation, since an institutional translator may have to deal with texts of a very diverse nature, ranging from legal texts (to a very large extent) to those of other specialised fields (medicine, IT, agriculture, to name but a few).

In this context, the translator will have to work essentially in an anonymous way and as part of a team, respecting as much as possible the linguistic, lexical and formal conventions specific to the texts of the organization in question, whether national or international (this is probably where the bulk of what we call institutional translation takes place). All these conventions, in fact, lend coherence to the body of texts that the translator contributes to create through his or her work. These texts are often recurrent, or amended, so the translator must pay the utmost attention to the previously translated background texts, and this is a huge determining factor in his or her job.

record

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Introduction



European Parliament Building

Although the concept of institutional translation may be somewhat vague and, above all, difficult to distinguish from others which are very similar (such as administrative translation, which is probably even less concrete), it is undoubtedly of crucial importance given that it is an essential translation activity at national and international level.

Bearing in mind that the figures, as will be seen below, are not always accurate, it is safe to assume that a very high percentage of non-literary translation

across the world is, in one way or another, institutional translation. Moreover, as it is a very broad, diverse and heterogeneous activity, it is difficult to establish general parameters when we try to define it by its content. It will be easier if we focus, as we will do in this article, on the formal description of its practice and on the conditions under which it is carried out. For this reason, it seems essential to pay attention to a professional context that generates thousands of translated pages every year.

Institutional translation can be defined, in a broad sense, as the one taking place in administrative bodies of all sorts, i.e., in public institutions, both national and international. In fact, this type of translation is not a genre in itself: institutional translation is, in fact, a professional context.

A translator who works in this setting will have to deal with legal texts (to a large extent), but also with medical, technological, social, agri-food and many other types of texts, using a specific working method and subject to fairly strict guidelines, although in the latter case not all

contexts are entirely homogeneous (it goes without saying that the work at the European Commission differs from any small office in a smaller national public body). This is because there are public institutions active in almost every imaginable technical field, so the texts generated are of the most varied nature, as are the resulting translation needs.

Having already pointed out that it is very difficult to delineate the content of institutional translation, it is worth dwelling briefly on this matter. We have mentioned the fact that any type of body or department within the branches of government that has a need for communication or information - both terms being understood in the widest possible terms - can generate institutional translation needs. This is so because the concept of institutional translation is merely nominal; it says nothing about the purpose of this activity. A government department that wishes to publish an action protocol in a foreign language will produce a translated text that is characterized in certain contexts as "administrative translation". An administrative body that wishes to access a report written in a foreign language or a court that must enforce a foreign judgment will handle a text translated into the national language and which one would not hesitate to describe as a [legal translation](#) (although, surprisingly, there is sometimes an attempt to differentiate between judicial and legal translation). In all the referred cases, precisely because of the context in which the work is carried out, we are dealing with examples of institutional translation.



Institutional Translation White Paper (Spain, 2011). [Source](#).

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¶ Working conditions in the institutional translation field

As mentioned above, institutional translation takes place in, or for, public institutions. We have to begin by defining briefly what a public institution is. These are bodies or departments that perform functions that are consistent with the exercise of the powers of the State or the supranational organization in question. Due to their special position, their actions are subject to different requirements and limitations, i.e., they have to comply with different types of rules, many of them of the highest order (statutes). Therefore, a public institution (from a government department to a mere unit within a larger one) must abide by the legal provisions that define the actions they can perform within their vested powers. And this framework is one of the basic elements we need to analyse when it comes to this particular kind of translation and interpretation. It always takes place in a more or less strictly regulated environment. Such premise is valid both at national level and for international organizations: all of them are equally subject to legal requirements that define this activity.

While, to a certain point, it is possible to examine this concept regardless of its subject matter, the same cannot be said of the professional context in which institutional translation takes place. In this we follow the principle underlying certain collective works that have looked into this issue (Cruces and Luna 2003; Borja and Prieto 2013). We will now go on to describe the context in which this type of translation takes place and the features that generally define the type of texts that are produced.

A first distinctive feature of this type of translation is that it usually takes place within an administrative service. Even when, as will be seen, there are numerous freelance translators active in this field, their work is sent back to the service that commissioned it for revision purposes (in an ideal situation, as will be indicated below), or for distribution to the relevant parties or even for publication for general knowledge or implementation. This is one of the first prominent features of the institutional translation context: its collective nature. The institutional translator normally works in a translation service, which may be more or less extensive, or more or less structured. Some countries or organizations, depending on their circumstances, have perfectly organized services, which are well-staffed and have enough technical resources at their disposal. On the contrary, in others the services are understaffed and unstructured. In all cases, however, translation is always integrated in a collective service. Although this is not always the actual case, the institutional translator must give up individualism, a very pronounced trait in many translators, regardless of the field in which they work, in order to become part of a team. This is why the concept of teamwork has such a strong significance in this domain: institutional translation is a work of multiple authorship. This will be further emphasized when we refer to the organic nature of institutional translation.

The fact that the translator is (directly or indirectly, as is the case of freelance translators) part of a team means that his or her work will generally be anonymous, at least to the outside world. Institutional translators do not sign their translations (at most, identifying initials may sometimes be used, and solely for internal purposes), and in fact it is only fair that this should be the case, as this type of translation is but a part of the administration universe which it is supposed to serve. The translation of a judicial document has no other purpose than to facilitate proceedings before the courts, or even to make it possible. The translation of an international agreement is the expression of the will of the two subjects of international law who have agreed to cooperate towards a common purpose. The translation of an act of an international organization is conducive to the effects for which it is intended, and so on. Institutional translation is always instrumental in nature.

This feature goes hand in hand with the fact that institutional translation is generally a purely technical endeavour. The institutional text is one of the tools available to a public entity in order to perform its functions. The translated text is sometimes placed on the same level as the original, to reflect the will of the originating body. This is not always the case: certain international agreements are only effective in the language in which they are negotiated (e.g. English), or the original is sometimes the only authentic text to be used in the event of a discrepancy, the translations then being mere courtesy versions. However, in other cases, for example, and most notably, in the case of the European Union, the original of certain texts and their translation to other languages overlap in terms of their effects. Both are authentic texts and both are even officially considered original texts (neither is considered a translation of the other, so as to avoid discrimination among the official languages).

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The nature of institutional texts and their translation

The unavoidable consequence of the technical nature of these translated texts is twofold: their stylistic neutrality and the variety and complexity of their terminology. (Garrido & Navarrete 2004)

Although it is true that the institutional field is very broad and that there is also the possibility of translating texts from different genres (for example, in the European Parliament, speeches by MEPs are translated. These texts logically show the characteristics of an oratory piece and not specifically technical features). In principle, therefore, we should not seek or find literary traces in an institutional text. The style should be that of a technical text that plays a specific role in the institutional framework- a report, a legal or regulatory text or an instruction. Apart from speeches and similar statements mentioned above, another type of texts that may deviate from such principle are judicial texts, specifically judgments, in which some emotional traits may be present in both the mind and the pen of the author (and should therefore be reproduced by the translator), but this is generally not the case. In turn, this technical nature entails the use of a wide range of terms specific to each specialised field, which compels translators to bring into play all the documentation possibilities that the world of today has to offer. In fact, there is a logical crossover of specialized languages, since the regulation of a fishing matter, for example, requires the use of legal terminology in addition to the terminology specific to this realm: the examples are too many to mention. In many cases, these are terminologically mixed texts.

These texts with a general scope (in the sense that they deal with multiple aspects that define our society) have produced and continue to produce an enormous amount of neologisms that have become a part of the technical legal, economic *et al.* jargon used in our language. The potential for language renewal (real and tangible, even if not always elegant) of institutional translation cannot be overlooked.

The instrumental - one might even add ritualistic - nature of many of these texts also requires the use of a specific structure and phraseology. Formalism is generally one of the most pronounced characteristics of this type of texts, and consequently of their translation. The phenomenon has been pointed out on many occasions: a judgment is not such if it does not present a certain structure and does not contain a specific phraseology. A technical document for the submission of a project with a view to obtaining aid from the institutions of the European Union must present certain formal features or its authors run the risk of failing in their purpose. An international treaty always adopts a certain form, within a range of options, and so on. Form intrinsically entails a phraseology, inherited from time-honoured formulations, even if some might describe them as archaic. These are issues that should perhaps be examined in greater depth when dealing with legal translation, even if they do not exclusively pertain to it.

These two characteristics, form and specific wording, are the ones that most influence the problem of the intelligibility of the translated institutional text, again more typical of the legal field, but not exclusive to it either (European Union 2020, *Comisión para la modernización del lenguaje jurídico*, 2009). The reality is that it is not merely the phraseology that makes it difficult to understand most of the texts that are translated by institutional translators. Most of those texts, due to their technical nature, are not within the reach of the general public, sometimes their intended recipients, assuming it were feasible to define the target audience more or less precisely in every case. And this opens up a second debate: to what extent is the translator responsible for the possible unintelligibility of the text he or she has produced? Could he or she intervene in some way to "iron out" the lexical, syntactic or stylistic rough edges of the original and smooth the way for the reader?

In our opinion, in principle, translators should adopt a certain neutrality in this respect. As we pointed out earlier, the translator is not the addressee of the original text, but an intermediary for an

audience that is often indeterminate or blurred (in the case of the translation of, for example, an EU regulation, the entire population of the State of his or her mother tongue; in the case of a technical report, the requesting department... the possibilities are highly complex). The precise level of knowledge required to understand, if one wants to use this term, the translated text is very difficult to pinpoint, although efforts have been made in this direction. Faced with this situation, the main alternative offered to the translator is to strive to make the text syntactically or stylistically less convoluted, avoiding, for example, excessive nominalization (a real plague of these texts) and splitting ("conduct a study" for "study") and using other resources that do not undermine the essential meaning of the original and are used only to facilitate its reading and, ultimately, its comprehension. The major stumbling block in this regard will always be the legal lexicon, which can or should rarely be dispensed with.

However, when it comes to ritual formulations, extremely abundant in legislative and judicial texts, as well as in institutional ones, the translator cannot do without them unless the author (very often a diffuse figure) of the original does so. In fact, maybe the bodies in charge of modernizing these texts should have the last word on the matter.

In addition to the instrumental and technical nature of institutional translation, certain areas of translation have a very marked feature, which we could describe as its 'organic' nature. In the context of the activity of public bodies and international institutions, we must distinguish between two types of texts: those that are translated once and, in principle, do not come back to the translating service, and those that 'return' several times because they are 'living' texts. There are many examples: international agreements which, once translated, are amended and must be translated again (in whole or in part); regulatory texts (e.g., from the European Union) which are also modified and must also be re-translated; cross-references between texts (e.g., case law citations in the text of a judgment, citations of articles from one regulatory text in another), among many other examples. These texts refer to one another and to a wide range of other texts (self- and heteroreferentiality), which can add complexity to their translation due to the need to cross-check these references (although translation aids and especially the Internet have solved what not too long ago was a very serious problem for institutional translators). When references to modifications or amendments are very numerous, it is even possible to speak of diachronic translation: a text created over time is translated (or perhaps re-translated) until it reaches a first final version, which will cease to be final if subsequent amendments are introduced. This does not always happen, but it is not at all infrequent. Ultimately, this fact gives coherence to the set of texts pertaining to the originating body or organization.

This phenomenon gives rise to a very interesting knock-on effect. First of all, it demands from the translator the utmost respect for precedent: what has already been translated must be faithfully reproduced as such, because in reality the original text, translated and re-translated with amendments over time, is always one. The previous textual quotations are integrated into the new text and create a new textual entity, and so on. Respect for this method is an unquestionable proof of the precision of those who devote themselves to institutional translation. However, a curious and undesirable side-effect of this method cannot go unnoticed: the perpetuation of errors. The notion of error that is used here is flexible or even merely descriptive: from a blatant translation mistake, which is often, but not always, subsequently corrected, to the use of an imprecise term; it can also be a matter of wording, much more debatable but evident if texts of the same category are

compared (for example, unusual formulations for that kind of text that, nevertheless, are not grammatically wrong constructions). Although this phenomenon may seem anecdotal, it is not so when it affects the quality of the translated text. There are, of course, procedures to correct this type of situations, but they are not always agile or consistently implemented.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this need to respect precedents or textual quotations from previous translations attaches a very important role to the documentation services of the organizations in question; this, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

In fact, if we reflect on it, this knock-on effect is not unlike that which occurs in legislation and in administrative regulations, which evolve over time and become increasingly complex due to the continuous amendments that are introduced (they can also be 'living' texts). And this is the reason we should insist once again on the clear intertwining between regulation and translation, a very evident phenomenon if we look at the type of institutional translation carried out in international bodies, especially the European Union. It is a true assertion that there is no EU Law without (institutional) translation. Compliance with EU norms could not be demanded from citizens if these rules had not been previously translated, which makes the translator an essential piece in the legislative process itself (Garrido 2003: 91 et seq.), a fact that perhaps has not been sufficiently emphasized.

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¶ Quality control in institutional translation - the revision phase

norma española UNE-EN ISO 17100

Noviembre 2015

TÍTULO Servicios de traducción

Requisitos para los servicios de traducción

Translation Services. Requirements for translation services. (ISO 17100:2015)
Servicios de traducción. Exigencias relativas a los servicios de traducción. (ISO 17100:2015)

CORRESPONDENCIA Esta norma es la versión oficial, en español, de la Norma Europea EN ISO 17100:2015, que a su vez adopta la Norma Internacional ISO 17100:2015.

OBSERVACIONES Esta norma amula y sustituye a la Norma UNE-EN 15038:2006.

ANTECEDENTES Esta norma ha sido elaborada por el comité técnico AEN/CTN 174 Servicios de traducción cuya Secretaría desempeña ASPROSET.

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Cover of the UNE-EN 17100 standard in Spanish

this is just a first approach to the matter. It is not just a question of quality control, but of ensuring that the "product" issued by an administrative (translation) service meets the legal certainty

The last aspect we will address is not exclusive to institutional translation, but it has a special relevance in this field. Depending on the type of unit or department in which this task is carried out, which as stated above may operate under very different circumstances, the translation process requires, as a last step, a revision phase.

As we have already mentioned, teamwork is, or should be, a distinctive feature of institutional translation. In an ideal situation, every translation team should have a formal or *de facto* figure of the reviewer ('*reviseur*'), who must give the final seal of approval to the translation. We have repeatedly pointed out that the translation process requires review because of the quality control phase that is inherent to service processes (the UNE-EN ISO 17100: 2015 standard), and institutional translation is also a service, although the "client" has very special characteristics, since it is usually another body within the Administration or organization in question. But

requirements inherent to its purpose. The task is not to deliver any translation, but a correct, faithful, complete and suitable translation for the intended purpose, with all that this entails in terms of terminology, phraseology and form, as indicated above. This is also one of the main arguments in favor of well-structured translation services within the civil service: ultimately, the citizens themselves are often the direct or indirect recipients of the texts to be translated, and proper communication with them is a cornerstone of any democratic process.

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📄 Institutional translation in numbers

Finally, it is worth mentioning some numbers in the field of institutional translation. It is not easy to find up-to-date figures on this subject, both in terms of the number of personnel in the service of the various administrations and the amount of pages translated. The reason of offering even approximate figures lies in highlighting the special importance of this type of translation, which often goes unnoticed as a somewhat "obscure" task and is sometimes even branded as an undesirable bureaucratic burden.

For example, the European Union does not provide strictly up-to-date figures, but the fact is its translation services processed 1,8 million pages in 2018 (European Commission 2018), although in its activity report for 2018, the Directorate-General for Translation stated that 315,000 pages had been translated in June of that year alone, an unprecedented milestone (European Commission 2018). The total number of members in its translation staff is 1,750. The United Nations, for its part, employs 3,000 people in these tasks, distributed between headquarters and the various units and organizations around the world (United Nations 2020). The figures for national administrations are, as can be imagined, much more modest (RITAP 2012), but in any case they offer a glimpse of the importance, even quantitatively, of this type of translation. The employment or administrative relationship that these professionals have with the institution they work for can vary - some of them have a civil servant relationship while others carry out freelance work. Freelancing, in fact, accounts for a growing volume of the translation work carried out in international institutions and it is expected to increase in the coming years to reach more than a third of the total number of pages translated in the European Union, for example (DG Translation 2018). Unfortunately, and as a comparative note, it is literally impossible to quantify the number of people working in language services in the Spanish Administration (RITAP 2012).



EU Directorate General of Translation (Source: Inés Ramón)

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🔍 Research potential

Simply because of its sheer volume, institutional translation probably represents one of the most fertile fields for research as far as non-literary translation is concerned. First, it would be of essence to describe and analyse the professional context in which institutional translators and interpreters operate. Second, the texts produced are of great interest because of the characteristics pointed out in the body of this article (mixed specialized languages, phraseology, etc.). Moreover, the institutional lexicon is a 'living' one, in constant evolution, as opposed to the institutional framework in which it is generated; it has bred and it will continue to breed a large number of neologisms, necessary to express the different ways in which citizens from different backgrounds relate to their respective legal, economic or the environmental realms, to cite but a few examples. The influence of foreign languages, especially English, is giving birth to a new language that needs to be examined and in whose formation translators play a decisive role. Analysing such contribution would undeniably be a worthy subject of research. On the other hand, there is work to be done on the intelligibility of institutional texts and the ways in which translators could or should (not) intervene to make them more accessible to the general public. All this would greatly contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of translation.

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Credits



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