

# Institutional Translation

Subjects: [Linguistics](#)

Contributor: Feng Pan

Institutional Translation refers to translation activities or translated works initiated or benefited by institutions.

institution

translation

## 1. Introduction

Since Mossop (1988) introduced the term ‘institutional translation’, this phrase has been widely used in Translation Studies to refer to “any translation carried out in the name, on behalf of, and for the benefit of institutions”<sup>[1]</sup>. So far, a number of studies have been conducted into translations in various institutional settings, particularly the media websites, news agencies or political institutions. An intimate yet complex relationship between translation and institution has been argued by a number of scholars in the field. At a more macro level, the formulation of translation policies, the endowment of translation rights for certain social groups as well as how translation practice is carried out in institutional settings are usually found framed within institutional agendas. This is supported by studies on institutional translation in monolingual countries including those with a relatively homogeneous population, such as South Korea<sup>[2][3]</sup>, and those with a hegemonic official language and other regional minority languages, such as the UK<sup>[4]</sup>, multilingual countries such as Belgium and Canada<sup>[5][6][7]</sup>, and international/supranational organisations, such as the EU or the UN<sup>[8][9][10][11]</sup>. At a more micro level, detailed analyses of translation products by specific translating institutions have generally revealed the shaping role of institutional orientation on a translator’s output. Focusing mostly on various government-related institutions, news agencies or international institutions, the majority of these studies demonstrate that the translators’ decision-making process and resultant translations reflect the voice or goals of the institution for which they produce the translations (e.g. Kang 2007<sup>[2]</sup>, Schäffner 2012<sup>[12]</sup>). Yet, exceptional cases have also been reported. For example, Munday’s (2007)<sup>[13]</sup> study of Cuban institutional translations of Castro’s proclamation shows that the translated texts in fact deviate from the voice conveyed by the source text through a distinct transitivity pattern. In the study Munday argues that the shifts identified may not necessarily be motivated by the translators’ ideological position as defined by the institution which they work for but may also arise from cognitively less conscious translation choices. In addition, Harding’s (2014)<sup>[14]</sup> examination of translations by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing as a translating institution shows that while most of the translated outputs are aligned with the narrative of the government to which the institution is affiliated, there are also a few exceptions that introduce alternative narratives and voices. Overall, these findings point to the “delicate and complicated”<sup>[15]</sup> nature of translations within institutional settings, calling for further corroboration of results. On the other hand, within the Chinese context, a few studies have recently been devoted to exploring translator’s positioning within certain news agencies or media organisations through an analytical approach to translated discourse<sup>[16][17]</sup>. However, studies on translations of

Chinese political discourse have mostly been approached from a prescriptive point of view, discussing the appropriate translation methods or strategies, the optimal translation choices, or assessment of translation quality as noted in the introduction. A few exceptions are Li and Li's (2015)<sup>[18]</sup> and Li and Xu's (2018)<sup>[19]</sup> descriptive investigations of translations of Chinese political texts. While the former limits itself to a general account of the institutional translation practice in China without providing direct evidence from specific institutions, the latter is devoted to the linguistic perspective largely neglecting the context of production. Consequently, the lack of sufficient empirical evidence on the actual institutional translation practice of political discourse calls for more systematic and in-depth examination of institutional contexts in China.

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## 2. Translations in Institutional Context

Since Mossop (1988) introduced the term 'institutional translation', this phrase has been widely used in Translation Studies to refer to "any translation carried out in the name, on behalf of, and for the benefit of institutions" (Gouadec 2007: 36). So far, a number of studies have been conducted into translations in various institutional settings, particularly the media websites, news agencies or political institutions.

An intimate yet complex relationship between translation and institution has been argued by a number of scholars in the field. At a more macro level, the formulation of translation policies, the endowment of translation rights for certain social groups as well as how translation practice is carried out in institutional settings are usually found framed within institutional agendas. This is supported by studies on institutional translation in monolingual countries including those with a relatively homogeneous population, such as South Korea (Kang 2007, Kim 2017), and those with a hegemonic official language and other regional minority languages, such as the UK (Núñez 2016), multilingual countries such as Belgium and Canada (Gagnon 2010, Meylaerts 2013, Mossop 1988), and international/supranational organisations, such as the EU or the UN (Koskinen 2008, Schäffner *et al.* 2014, Svoboda *et al.* 2017, Prieto Ramos 2018). At a more micro level, detailed analyses of translation products by specific translating institutions have generally revealed the shaping role of institutional orientation on a translator's output. Focusing mostly on various government-related institutions, news agencies or international institutions, the majority of these studies demonstrate that the translators' decision-making process and resultant translations reflect the voice or goals of the institution for which they produce the translations (e.g. Kang 2007, Schäffner 2012). Yet, exceptional cases have also been reported. For example, Munday's (2007) study of Cuban institutional translations of Castro's proclamation shows that the translated texts in fact deviate from the voice conveyed by the source text through a distinct transitivity pattern. In the study Munday argues that the shifts identified may not necessarily be motivated by the translators' ideological position as defined by the institution which they work for but may also arise from cognitively less conscious translation choices. In addition, Harding's (2014) examination of translations by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing as a translating institution shows that while most of the translated outputs are aligned with the narrative of the government to which the institution is affiliated, there are also a few exceptions that introduce alternative narratives and voices. Overall, these findings point to the "delicate

and complicated” (Kang 2014: 476) nature of translations within institutional settings, calling for further corroboration of results.

On the other hand, within the Chinese context, a few studies have recently been devoted to exploring translator’s positioning within certain news agencies or media organisations through an analytical approach to translated discourse (Pan 2015, Wu and Zhang 2015). However, studies on translations of Chinese political discourse have mostly been approached from a prescriptive point of view, discussing the appropriate translation methods or strategies, the optimal translation choices, or assessment of translation quality as noted in the introduction. A few exceptions are Li and Li’s (2015) and Li and Xu’s (2018) descriptive investigations of translations of Chinese political texts. While the former limits itself to a general account of the institutional translation practice in China without providing direct evidence from specific institutions, the latter is devoted to the linguistic perspective largely neglecting the context of production. Consequently, the lack of sufficient empirical evidence on the actual institutional translation practice of political discourse calls for more systematic and in-depth examination of institutional contexts in China.

### 3. Ideology in Translation and Critical Discourse Analysis

Ideology, understood as a “set of beliefs and values which inform an individual’s or institution’s view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts and other aspects of experience”<sup>[20]</sup>, has been a major concern of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a theoretical approach of language study that investigates the relationship between text and the sociocultural context within which it is embedded. It aims to examine the ways social inequality and dominance are encoded in, reproduced and resisted by discourse in a certain social cultural context<sup>[21]</sup>, and how discourse serves to produce and maintain existing social structures. Particularly, it is interested in “revealing structures of power and unmasking ideologies”<sup>[22]</sup> behind those seemingly innocent and value-free texts by identifying patterned language use. The identification of different linguistic patterns, e.g. content, linguistic features, or discursive function, is usually assisted by exploiting a number of analytical concepts, such as those from systemic-functional grammar. Put simply, CDA intends primarily to discover how discourse is structured in particular ways as to perform certain social functions.

Translation Studies, on the other hand, by resorting to CDA, has also developed a major interest in the ideological issues affecting translating since the 1990s<sup>[23]</sup>. From the perspective of CDA, translation can be viewed as a social practice which inevitably shapes and is shaped by power relations between its various participants. So far, CDA has been utilised extensively in discussing a translator’s stance in a variety of translation works, such as those by specific institutions, and proved effective in revealing the hidden ideology or power relations behind those subtle yet crucial translational choices (e.g. Calzada Pérez 2003<sup>[23]</sup>, Kang 2007<sup>[2]</sup>, Mason 2010<sup>[20]</sup>).

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