# Understanding institutional translation

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Translation within a Salesian context will almost always be a case of ‘institutional translation’, if we understand that term to mean translating in or for a specific organisation, in this case the Society of St Francis de Sales/Salesian Society/Salesians of Don Bosco.

Is institutional translation so different from any other? Perhaps not at a basic level, but it certainly has different characteristics (here referred to the SDB institutional context):

* There are six languages that ANS and sdb.org consider to be the ‘official’ languages: I*talian, Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Polish*. These are not listed here in any specific order other than to acknowledge Italian as the accepted prime language of the Congregation and often, but not always, the original source text.
* There are or should be (since these often do not exist) *glossaries*, *style guides* and *other conventions* or ‘*house rules*’. Individual translators usually have their own glossaries and house rules, but there may not be many common ones. We know that the EAO Region certainly has a published glossary/dictionary for the Italian-English pair, and other internal pairs or triples (e.g. Chinese-Italian-English) in some provinces, though we do not know the extent to which they are used. An English style guide exists online (sdb.org, SDL, BoscoLink), though we do not know if it is followed.
* There will be *reference documents* (hundreds of them in a document-heavy Congregation such as the Salesians of Don Bosco), and these need to be consulted in every instance where source documents use them or refer to them explicitly or implicitly.

There are also some particularly salient aspects of the Salesian institutional translator’s work that make it different from non-institutional translation:

* The translator’s personality or ‘voice’ needs to be less obvious or not obvious at all. Just as the original document belongs essentially to the institution (even if from the Rector Major so long as he is writing in that role), so does the translation. *If the texts are the ‘choir’, then the translator is the ‘conductor’* – and readers have come to listen to the music, not watch the conductor!
* Translated texts need to be *consistent in stylistic terms*, especially if the document is a large one and has been translated by several people (as has been the case with some major documents from the Formation Department). The only way to ensure stylistic consistency is by *following agreed-upon conventions in terminology and style*. A style guide and a terminological list or database are truly essential for institutional translation.
* *RMG’s working method needs to be followed*. This can often mean (as has been the case with follow-up material from GC28) that one may be translating a document that is still going through a negotiated process – obviously the case for day-by-day translation during a General Chapter, but also sometimes the case for documents that follow it. There will be corrections and updates. Hence the need to maintain consistency of style, avoidance of elegant prose on the part of one or other individual translator which might make a version stand out (discordant note in the choir, or is it change of conductor mid-performance?).
* *Adherence to precedence*. Given the number of existing institutional documents, any reference to them has to be followed up, and that prior version adhered to, not re-translated for today. This sometimes means working with bad grammar, even mistranslation from earlier times! Of course, while the rule is to follow precedent, there can be good reasons for deviating from precedent, and these have to be discussed.
* In institutional translation it is not the case that one simply translates what is in front of one. There might be an original error. It then becomes *the translator’s duty to alert the author or other responsible individual to the error*, asking that it be given consideration. It would be inappropriate to fix the error without this discussion – it may be fixed wrongly!

## All of which raise the question of quality

Quality may be understood as quality of product or quality of process. Leaving the first aside for the moment, the characteristics listed above would appear to be more connected with quality of process (sometimes referred to as Quality Assurance in the translation industry, as distinct from Quality Assessment).

Given that translation in the Salesian context is very often of an institutional nature, it will typically be *collective*, *anonymous* and *standardised* (as seen from the characteristics listed earlier). So, how do we ensure a quality of process for this? Obviously ‘collective’ implies ‘team’, and ‘anonymous, standardised’ imply the existence of conventions and guidelines.

It might be helpful here to refer to the EU as one of the world’s largest ‘translator organisations’, to see how they tackle the matter. In the first instance they have clear guidelines for quality of product: which, although not the main focus of this essay, is at least instructive. A quality translation will exhibit the following properties:

* “complete” (no omissions or additions)
* “accurate and consistent rendering of the source text”
* correct references to any already published documents
* internal terminological consistency and consistency with reference materials
* clarity, relevant register and observance of text-type conventions
* no language errors and correct formatting
* compliance with instructions

Note that the word ‘faithful’ is not used these days. ‘Fit for purpose’ is the more likely descriptor for institutional translation, which includes readability, naturalness, clarity, and accuracy.

The EU also recognises that in-house translation is far better than external, out-sourced translation (cheaper but better quality as well). Salesians would also recognise this to be true.

Returning to quality of process issues, what are we looking at? Among other things: *quality of workflow at pre-translation, translation and post-translation stages.*

* Pre-translation means things like a properly edited sourced file, terminology resources, proper assignment processes.
* At the translation stage it means sufficient support for the translator – terminology assistance perhaps, opportunities for consultation certainly.
* The post-translation stage suggests the need for review.

It is probably the case that as far as Salesian institutional translation is concerned, the quality of workflow issue needs overhauling.

## Any conclusions we can draw?

As an international body, the Salesians are not operating in a bubble. There are generally established international standards for translation, and it would improve our processes if we were aware of them and were generally able to adhere to them in accordance with our needs.

In practice, these standards mean there is work done on terminology, style guides, standardisation, codes of practice, as well as an efficient workflow.

Perhaps, rather than presenting conclusions as statements, it might be more helpful to present them as questions needing some response and as much exploration as is necessary for that response to be adequate.

* **Are adequate tools available within the RMG ‘translation ministry’** (‘ministry’ with all its ecclesiological overtones)for obtaining a quality product that is fit for purpose? Quality-enhancing tools includes style guides, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, databases/repositories to ensure consistency of terminology, phraseology, style within and across documents?
* **Do procedures include pre- and post-translation ones?** Quality at the pre-translation stage ultimately means prevention of poor quality: Ensuring the technical quality of the source. Style guides are important at the pre-translation stage. Translation manuals can also be helpful. Do such items exist for the six main languages or is it simply left up to the individual translator? Post-translation implies revision by another pair of eyes. It can occur at various levels depending on the importance of the document. Does revision of this kind take place?
* **Does the idea of quality go beyond just the linguistic aspect of a translation?** The layout of a translation should also conform to the source text’s layout. And any timelines need to be met. A missing translation version will only complicate or paralyse decision-making or publication processes.
* **Are any consultation processes in place?** Translators always have questions and they could also be gathered centrally to avoid repetition.
* **Are all reference documents readily available to translators?** This means an adequate database or repository that can be accessed. This is almost certainly a question that receives a ‘yes’ in the Salesian context insofar as there are two such ‘databases’: sdb.org and SDL. But perhaps the question really is: do all translators know how best to access the references they need, and is the availability of references the same for all six languages?