

BY THE WAY



DEADLINES

BY TONY BECKWITH

Translators must be versatile, resourceful, and creative. We must also keep our feet on the ground and be able to deliver a project on time. Deadlines are an integral part of our discipline, and we ignore them at our peril.

Webster's dictionary defines a "deadline" [*dead + line*] as:

- 1) A line drawn within or around a prison that a prisoner passes only at the risk of being instantly shot;
- 2) A line or mark made on the bed of a cylinder press to indicate the limit to which the printing surface may extend;
- 3) A fixed time limit: a date or time before which something must be done and after which the opportunity passes or a penalty follows (i.e., the deadline for filing income tax returns); or the time limit after which copy is not accepted for use in a particular issue of a publication (i.e., 3 a.m. is the deadline for the newspaper's morning edition);
- 4) A group of military vehicles put aside for repair or periodic maintenance.

According to Wikipedia, "a time limit or deadline is a narrow field of time, or particular point in time, by which an objective or task must be accomplished."

Neither source so much as mentions the word "unreasonable" which tells us that neither speaks on behalf of a full-time freelance translator.

I live with deadlines. Some are unreasonable, but they are strictly take-it-or-leave-it propositions. I don't have to accept them. But then I wouldn't get paid. I'll receive an email that says something like: "Yet another project for you, sorry for no notice." It's from a video production company that makes training videos for all manner of tasks and situations in the workforce: kitchen sanitation, chicken handling, team spirit, warehouse protocols, and so on. Once a project is under way the implacable recording schedule governs the lives of all concerned and the translator must keep up or the project falls behind. The deadlines are brutal and unforgiving.

Wikipedia’s “narrow field of time” closes in on me in suffocating waves of claustrophobia as I grasp the magnitude of my incoming workload—and resulting limited personal time—and gasp for air. Although I am usually subscribed to the third definition listed above, I can easily relate to the first one and think of a deadline as a merciless horizon: if I do not deliver on time I will be dead. But on projects like this one I’m as good as dead *until* I deliver.

The assignment is to translate a batch of scripts, and since the video has already been shot in English, the Spanish voiceover has to be short or long enough to fit into that little space of time. Easier said than done. True, some frames are straightforward and take little unraveling. But others are convoluted and wordy to begin with and must be distilled down to their essential meaning, which is usually all that the time will allow. My mind focuses on these frames and shuffles and winnows the words in the script, searching for the essence, looking for that ideal articulation that captures the meaning in a natural, colloquial way that sounds like native Spanish and fits in the time allowed. Phew! Then on to the next frame. There are 22 pages. And 12 more scripts. And the clock is ticking. I can’t talk now, I’m on a deadline.

An alternative to that grim scenario is the sweet, sunny email that attaches a guide for young children visiting a museum, with delightful texts about paintings and artists and works of art from New Guinea. “And there’s really no rush, by about the end of the month, will that work for you?” The text is great fun to translate, if you like that sort of thing. There is the same shuffling and winnowing, but here, instead of fitting the translation into a space of time, it has to be fitted into a child’s point of view. It’s a translator’s lagniappe, an opportunity for one’s inner child to come out and play.

Book, poetry, and art catalogue translations are complex projects in and of themselves and bring the added pressure of greater visibility, the sense of having one’s work on display. This pressure is, of course, pushing back against the client’s publishing deadline, and the translator gets squeezed in the middle. Sometimes extreme pressure produces marvelous results—like diamonds!—and the translation is exquisite, a thing of beauty. At other times the words in the source text are assembled in what seem to be illogical sequences that don’t quite make sense. No matter how simple or complex the text, there are always knots in the threads that must be teased out, unraveled, and untied. Natural complexities are fair game, but when the writing is mediocre or—worse!—downright sloppy, I am wont to simmer,

and struggle to refrain from railing at the screen. There's no point, I tell myself; it's a waste of precious time. Some texts are sublime, some make me furious. That's how it is.

And then there are variations on the theme, mostly of a literary style, in a variety of categories. By literary I mean that there is an element of literary creation involved in the translation process, made necessary when the source text evokes images or tickles connotations that must be expressed—can only be expressed—in a language inspired by literary considerations. By that definition, of course, some institutional newsletters can be considered literary translations; so can websites, and parental consent forms, and advertising brochures. That doesn't mean that I'm ready to translate *Don Quixote*, but I'm closer than I was a year ago.

Deadlines are an inevitable part of every project—the “death and taxes” of the translation industry. The more excruciating the deadline, the more likely that it will include a night shift. I like working at night; there are fewer interruptions. The later the hour, the more the mind is immersed in the translation, with occasional furtive excursions to a parallel universe of thoughts and memories and other distractions. Some nights I have an out-of-body experience and seem to be standing right behind me, peering over my own shoulder, looking at my process, scrutinizing what I'm doing. My process has three stages: reading, writing, and revision.

I look at one sentence at a time and identify the various “elements” in each one. These could be clauses or ideas or parenthetical comments, that sort of thing. I let those elements float around in my mind as I absorb the overall gist of the sentence and wonder how I would express it in the target language. I rearrange the sequence of the elements in my mind, trying to make the translated sentence sound as though it was originally written in the target language. Then I write it, which is the second stage, in which a translator is a writer no matter what he or she does for the rest of the day.

The third stage involves tweaking and pruning and polishing the text until it sounds right from start to finish. How do we know when it sounds right? Our ear will tell us, if we cultivate our awareness of how people talk, how they string words together, so that we can “hear” what we are writing and know whether it sounds convincing. Among other things—such as an ability to write and a firm command of grammar, rules of syntax, dangling participles, and so on—good translation flows from a finely attuned cultural sensitivity that absorbs and identifies forms of expression and patterns of speech.

How long does that take? Some say that a translation is never really finished; it is merely abandoned at some point. The success of a translation owes as much to the choice of words as to their assembly. The articulation—the selection and arrangement of “connecting” words like verbs, conjunctions, prepositions—is what gives a text its fluency and its particular colloquial quality. It is what makes a sentence sound as though it was written by a native speaker. The third stage—quality control—may be lacking in glamor and might seriously challenge my patience, but it is arguably the most crucial.

In the grand scheme of things, some translations are important; many are not. But every written word has its own particular permanence: the potential to leave a trace of one’s passing. The translator’s work is thus part of the fabric of history.

Why do we do it? Why do we translate? Many reasons come to mind, but one thing is certain—there would be fewer translations if there were no deadlines.



“They said my bid was too high, so I told them, ‘You pay peanuts, you get monkeys,’ and the next thing I knew they accepted my proposal.”