

**I Congreso Internacional de Traducción Especializada**

**THE SINKING OF THE BELGRANO  
DOCUMENTARY TRANSLATION ISSUES**

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# **The Sinking of the Belgrano Documentary Translation Issues**

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There are many challenges and issues that confront a translator in providing quality translations. Working as a contract translator for National Geographic Television those challenges double since quality and professionalism on tight deadlines are their main requirements.

This presentation describes the challenges and issues that faced me as National Geographic translator during the pre-post production stages of the documentary: "The Sinking of the Belgrano". In this particular translation project, the process involved three key elements.

The first challenge was the emotional element. As an Argentine translator residing in Washington, DC, being assigned to carry out the task of overseeing the translations of this documentary had a special significance. It was not only about my own country but also about a part of our history which still moves my heart and those of million of others Argentines. This is a very sad episode that has to be accepted as part of our heritage and that most people around the world ignore or knew very little.

By the time National Geographic offered me part of this project, I was a newly graduated English/Spanish translator from American University in Washington. I had to explore new ways and take new risks since I have taught English my whole life and prohibited my students to translate even a single word into their native language. Now I was doing the opposite, I was doing what I always forbade. It was not an easy task to move from one profession to another, but I was so much interested in doing it that I put aside all those feelings and simply started working. It was just another challenge, apart from others, that I faced in my life.

At the start of this project in late 2003, I felt like a little child waiting for Santa Claus to arrive. Every time the doorbell rang I thought it was the courier from National Geographic delivering the expected package. Finally at 3 pm on Christmas's eve I received the first of many raw footage videos. It was Christmas, a very special time of the year when families get together to celebrate, but I never got that chance. I had no time to cook for myself. I ordered food, ate out or simply had light snacks as I worked late into the nights. Some days it even snowed as I witnessed the wonders of Mother Nature through my living room window.

I worked diligently over the holidays, New Year's included, to meet strict deadlines and awaited other deadlines to come. It was tedious at times, transcribing those striking and emotional words spoken by the actual witnesses of this powerful documentary. There were some moments, I literally burst into tears and prevented me from seeing what I was typing. But there was no time to waste, so I went on and on. National Geographic had entrusted me with this translation project and was expecting results.

Transcribing a one-hour tape, takes many time-consuming hours and I had plenty of one hour tapes. It was really difficult to stay awake and not get involved with the words people in the videotapes were saying. Many times, it was sad and too moving. In spite of this, I never let my feelings affect or interfere what I was doing. I tried to be objective and did not want to be a victim in the issue of conflict of interest.

The second element is the translator is a mediator. Nobody can deny that translators should possess a firm mastery of both the source and target languages but should also have an understanding of the field in question. Depending on their subject area, the translators can become agents of diffusion of a historic, cultural and artistic heritage. Thus, they make an important contribution helping their fellow citizens acquire an increasing awareness of such a historical wealth while keeping an eye on their everyday world.

Although the translator is a mediator, or considered as such, he/she also feels alone while performing his task. This loneliness I am referring today is the shared loneliness. It is not very easy to understand this issue and sometimes confusing while referring to it. The translator is alone and isn't alone. Although it may seem a little controversial, it is true, at times he is something more than the reader but a little less than the author. "Each book is an image of his loneliness". Paul Auster talks about that loneliness which is touched by a distant voice: the reader's distance is invaded by the author's. These loneliness exchanges define the act of language transfer. Although there is one person in the room, it plays two roles, the translator itself and its ghosts not always present and whose book is and isn't himself that is translating. It is possible to be alone and at the same time it is possible to be accompanied by this ghost, (Paul Auster, *La Invención de la Soledad*).

The third element is the actual hands-on work, the transcription and translation. Transcription is the making of an exact verbatim copy of recorded information in longhand or on a machine, as on a typewriter or computer. With very little time and working on strict deadlines, unavoidable in our field, most of the raw-footage videotapes with interviews were given to some of the best other Spanish translators National Geographic had at that time. This was done due to the abundance of material at hand. Within the first week, the result was a disaster: transcriptions were poor, incomplete, incomprehensible and misinterpreted, thus impossible to translate into understandable English. This was due to the fact that translators were unable to transcribe or translate the variety of Spanish spoken in Argentina although they were non-Argentine Spanish speakers. On top of this, there were military terms that hardly anyone knew unless you were in the Argentine Navy.

After reading and reviewing those other transcriptions, my supervisor told me to redo those transcriptions. I was now in charge of the entire translation project. It was exciting but it required much more work on my part and fewer hours to sleep and relaxed to be able to carry out the following step.

Once the transcription step was over, I had to move to the next one, the translation. Of course the Translations Director, Juan Tituana, and his staff at National Geographic supported my decisions and advice throughout this phase of the project as well.

When translating, a certain amount of both arrogance and humility are needed. These two terms may appear to be contradictory, but a certain amount of arrogance is needed to believe that we have the ability to become the author in another language while humility should always be present when carrying out a task.

I always kept in mind a good advice by Walter Benjamin while performing any translation. He recommends that a translator should pay little attention to foreign phrases and too much attention to words, particles that assume laws from other ones.

Each language has its own peculiarities and can not exist without the notion of time and space. Spanish from Argentina should not be different; however, it came out to be a real nightmare for some Spanish translators at that time.

Presenting translated pieces to National Geographic is always terrifying knowing that inevitably there would be some errors and omissions. This is why arrogance is needed during the translation process to sustain everyone to the finish. Otherwise, we would be paralyzed and confounded by doubts.

In order to keep top quality translations, they should be reread by a second translator / proofreader that has the same competence and skills in the source language as well in the target language to produce a good work. Sometimes translators are not so lucky to find the right person at the right time for reviewing the piece of art that meets a deadline.

I was lucky. I had the entire Argentine Navy attaché's office at my service, or whoever needed their assistance to have a concise translation of naval terminology. It was not difficult for me since I taught at the Military Academy for six years before moving to Washington DC

It was a great pleasure that I was able to use that knowledge and supervise the translations of this documentary. My dream came true, being able to put into practice all my military knowledge on such production and above all my history and my people. Although, I knew a great deal on military terminology I also did a lot of research on the ship, on her construction parts and her entire history.

As I mentioned earlier, the navy officers were always willing to give me a hand, so I kept calling them on a regular basis to check on special terminology and I would really like to highlight at this point of my speech and thank these two wonderful navy officers, Captain Drieling and Martinez who were eager to give me a helping hand. Captain Martinez happened to be on board of one of the ships that rescued the survivors from The Belgrano Cruiser. The rescue ship was Comandante Luis Piedrabuena.

So it is due to the pursuit of translation quality that good translators become the best foot soldiers of an army toiling in the shadows in order to open spaces for peoples to become aware, to meet and communicate. If translators are passionate and devoted to their work and abilities then the quality of the translation becomes an effortless job. With the pursuit for excellence and an endless quest for quality, these are the types of translators that National Geographic is constantly searching.

By the end of this grueling project, National Geographic was my second home, not only for being so many hours there, but I felt so much at ease with their Translations team. But no sooner that I turned in the entire translation project in I felt like sinking along with the Belgrano Cruiser to the bottom of the sea. I was so exhausted and did not show up at National Geographic for over a week. I got sick with the flu and I forgot about the world for a while. Nevertheless, at least I had a smiling face knowing that I had contributed my skills in this once-in-a-lifetime documentary not only for Argentina but also for the world to see.

The successful documentary "The Sinking of the Belgrano" by National Geographic has been shown around the world to over 200 million of viewers in more than 27 languages. It is also one such project where the real toils of translations will never be

known until we can actually share these presentations and experiences with other translators.