

11.0 Human rights editing -- The AHRC experience since 1995

The Asian Human Rights Commission is an Asian organization, which means that it is composed of people working on several Asian countries, alongside human rights activists from Asia. Among many other problems, we have to deal with the pressing issue of language. English is no longer the working language in most of the Asian countries in which we work. Each country has its own language; in fact, many languages and numerous dialects. Even so, English will remain an important second language in Asia, as it is the language most used in communication between countries. It is also a vital medium of communication for commerce and governmental institutions. As far as the communication of ideas goes however, English is a secondary means of communication.

As a regional organization with the intention of collaboration, English is our primary medium of communication as it brings together people who speak different languages. For activists from different countries who are working in English, their original training would have been in their local languages; they often hold degrees from universities in these languages. They are extremely articulate in their own communities, societies and in their own languages. The use of their second language as a primary communication tool is a difficulty to be overcome.

If this organization is to be effective, it should have communicators who are deeply rooted in their own societies, since all human rights problems are problems of societies. Whether we are dealing with civil and political rights, or economic, social and cultural rights, we must keep in mind that these issues vary greatly from one society to another. One Asian country will be markedly different from another in many of these matters, as a result of differences in affluence, communication facilities and development of institutions. It is those who have experience and intimate knowledge of these issues, and have had time to reflect on these problems, who are best equipped to communicate with the larger masses and the government about the changes that society needs, and how to incorporate international human rights standards into the local framework.

In a regional organization, difficulties arise when there are many people using their second language, English, to communicate. Given the resources available, resolving this problem is often difficult. It often comes down to the practical problem of being constantly in need of people who speak English as a first language for assistance. This is where the real problems arise. Knowledge of English as a first language does not carry with it any guarantee of knowledge about local problems. The general assumption would be that a person who speaks English as a first language (hereafter referred to as a first language speaker) is from a country of a different origin than an Asian country, and therefore there would be a language and cultural gap between them and the person from the Asian country who speaks English as a second language (hereafter referred to as the second language speaker.)

The process of editing is not just a question of language; it is a question of meaning, specifically, the meaning of different things in different contexts. In the process of editing, unless the first language speaker understands what the second language speaker is trying to say, there might be large gaps in communication. A first language speaker from a different social and cultural context may find the subject that is being spoken about to be unfamiliar, since it is not part of their experience. Today, problems such as extrajudicial killings, routine police torture and disappearances are not part of the experience of someone who has grown up in a developed country. The functioning of underdeveloped democracies and institutions, as well as the challenges and corruption faced by ordinary citizens and the

people who work in underdeveloped institutions, are not part of the experiences of many of those who live in developed countries.

Without understanding and reflecting on these experiences, there would be gaps in meaning between a second language speaker's written material and that edited by the first language speaker. This is and always will be, a problem of communication within a group of people who work in the way that we do. The second language speaker could think that the first language speaker is being careless, or is not sensitive to what she or he is talking about. On the other hand, the first language speaker could think that the second language speaker does not know how to communicate their ideas, or might imagine something to be untrue because they have not experienced it. To a certain extent, this is a problem that can never be fully resolved. There are possible solutions. The second language speaker could acquire language abilities to the extent that she or he is no longer a second language speaker, or the first language speaker could acquire the relevant knowledge so that she or he is no longer alien to the context about which the second language speaker has spoken.

This issue cannot be resolved bureaucratically, by enforcing rules which people must follow. It can only be resolved by cultivating an understanding, and making a genuine effort at communication, with a high level of tolerance and understanding. It is about striking a balance; if the first language speaker dominates then the material will be rendered meaningless to the place where it should have meaning first (the place where the activist of the particular country is sending the material to, with the view that she or he might be able to influence societal change). On the other hand, if the material is not

arranged in a way that makes sense to an outsider, it will also be meaningless. This issue is at the heart of the problem of editing, which we have seen repeatedly over fifteen years. Individuals change but the problem remains, with no easy resolution.

For a person from a metropolitan city, and for a person from a less developed region, the following words would have different meanings, which would affect their understanding and consequently, their writing.

Security officer: In a metropolitan city, most security officers have no status, they may just be responsible for the security of private banks or private properties. Other than everyday security functions, they have no other status. However, a security officer in many other countries refers to a security agent who is working for a particular political alliance, spying on people, and could exercise enormous power in the form of abductions, murder or providing secret information that could damage employment and other opportunities. Anyone working with material on these issues should know the context from which people have allegations or suspicions of such officers.

Judge: In a metropolitan city, judges are usually regarded as people who have independence, are of a particular status and generally speaking, have normal suspicions. In other words, they would be capable of being impartial and competent in their work. However, in many other contexts, judges do not enjoy such a reputation. Ordinary citizens are often suspicious about judges; in some instances, they are presumed to be partial towards the ruling regime as well as towards the security apparatus of the country. Their actual concern for the liberty of citizens is usually considered to be under great suspicion. While in a metropolitan city, it may be presumed that there are methods of keeping judges above corruption, but such credibility is not enjoyed by judges in many other contexts. Therefore, once again, we see the problems in writing and editing on matters which are related to context.

Complaining to authorities: In metropolitan cities, in the general culture, the average citizen has the competence to complain, and normally, is not afraid to complain about normal violations by officers. However, a completely different situation prevails in other contexts, where making complaints against officers could lead to tremendous adverse consequences. Therefore, the fear to complain prevails in such a society. This context influences the behaviour of complainants as well as the overconfidence of the authorities who may engage in acts which, in a metropolitan city, would be extraordinary if they ever happened. Again, this context needs to be understood in the writing and editing of materials relating to such issues.

Harassment of women: The harassment of women takes place in metropolitan cities as well, but the level of harassment that authorities and others are able to impose on women in a repressive culture and political regime are proportionally enormous, and would be called abnormal in a metropolitan environment.

Normal and abnormal behaviour: The normal behaviour in a metropolitan city is created by the social conditions which have developed within the metropolitan city, and the capacities of the state to maintain security. Therefore, certain behaviour has already been conditioned to adjust to certain rules. However, what is normal for one society is not so for another; normal fears, levels of trust, precautions normally taken for this or that, differs in terms of context.

Proofreading

Minor errors relating to spelling, singular/plural usage, incorrect spacing or misplaced punctuation can be taken care of through simple proofreading; these do not require serious editing. One exercise conducted at the AHRC, whereby four second language speakers were given a book review written by a well known Indian writer and political activist, revealed two things: first, that even such an experienced writer had missed a few minor corrections, and second, that the second language speakers were able to point out the errors.

The text could have been read by the average reader even if those small errors had gone uncorrected. The knowledge of the second language speakers was adequate to read the text and detect such errors. This suggests that some minor misunderstandings in the area of editing can be cleared up by making arrangements for proofreading amongst colleagues themselves.