

The Unique Way the Khmer Rouge Used Language and its Challenges for Translators

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Since its inception in 1995, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) has been collecting documents related to the history of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979). To date, the Center has amassed well over 600,000 pages of documentation from this regime, including text books, correspondence, cadre notebooks, diaries, telegrams, committee minutes, reports, and photographs and films. DC-Cam's collection also includes petitions and interview transcripts from the regime's survivors, and a variety of other materials.

The language the Khmer Rouge used in their communications - military, educational, propaganda, and civil administration - will likely pose challenges for both interpreters and translators because it varies greatly from standard Khmer.[1] It can be characterized in many instances as:

a.. Idiomatic. The CPK's documents contain many ambiguous terms and phrases that most people (including interpreters and legal practitioners) would find difficult to understand without an historical knowledge of Democratic Kampuchea. Examples include 'carry out shock assaults', 'smash', 'staunch revolutionary stand in terms of a clean morality of living and cleanliness in political terms', and 'consciousness illness'.

b.. Lacking in clear reference: The CPK's documents also employed many political figures of speech that are not intuitively obvious, such as: 'Burn the outside to a crisp, but pull it out while the inside is still raw'; and 'Small-fry eats a little, big-shot eats a lot'. Some are metaphoric, such as 'Angkar [the CPK Central Committee, but commonly understood as the Khmer Rouge] has the eyes of the pineapple' (this phrase implied that Angkar was watching people wherever they were).

c.. Maoist. The leaders of the Democratic Kampuchea adopted an extreme form of Mao's doctrines. They employed such common Communist phrases as 'dialectic materialism', but also added a distinct twist of their own. Some examples include: 'only when the requirements of cleanly sweeping away the concealed enemies boring from within are consistently grasped will it be possible to sweep them out absolutely cleanly and successively'; 'reorient ideological and organizing views and stances in time'; 'the dictatorship of proletariat of the party'; and 'strengthen the stance of absolute and hot class struggle'.

d.. Adjective- and adverb-based. The Khmer Rouge used adjectives and adverbs heavily, and translators will be hard pressed to find their equivalents in English. For example, 'feliculously welcome the second anniversary of national independence: The super-fantastic 17th of April'; 'eliminate absolutely immaculately the ideology of individual and personal property rights'; 'sweep cleanly away'; and 'let's congratulate super-excellently the glorious Communist Party of Kampuchea'.

e.. Administrative. The CPK organized its administrative system very differently from those used in previous regimes, and its language reflects this. Examples include such administrative terms as 'squad', 'fifty-member unit', 'mobile work brigade', 'Economic Support Unit', 'Hot Group' 'Cool Group' and 'Chewing Group'. The latter three are understood to refer to the CPK units responsible for conducting torture and extracting confessions.

Such atypical language has been interpreted and understood differently by Cambodian and international scholars alike. This could pose problems for translators in terms of accuracy and the time needed to produce a correct and nuanced translation. The key to understanding the CPK's use of Khmer lies in understanding Khmer Rouge history, administration, and terminology (an intimate knowledge of Cambodian culture is important, too).

To cope with such challenges, especially as the tribunal for senior Khmer Rouge leaders draw near, DC-Cam's Tribunal Response Team has developed an English language glossary that defines the terms the Khmer Rouge used. In addition, they have developed a transliteration system that encourages consistency in translating the names of people, places, and the like.

The glossary and transliteration systems were developed after careful readings and intensive research on the CPK cadres' diaries, notebooks on political sessions or trainings, and propaganda texts, which have given us insight into the obscure meanings of the language employed by the Khmer Rouge. Finally, our experience in interviewing former lower-level CPK cadres has added greatly to our understanding of the unique terms found in a variety of CPK documents.

Before the tribunal begins, it is important that the tribunal's translators and investigation teams understand the meanings of the terms found in CPK documents. This will require that they first study the historical context of the regime, which will give them a better background in understanding how the Khmer Rouge employed their unique language. Otherwise, many important points of evidence could be missed.

[1] "Khmer Rouge" is a term coined by King Sihanouk to refer to Cambodian leftists. It has come to be associated with the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).