

Translation woes hamper proceedings

Written by
Thursday, 23 April 2009 07:00

As testimony for the week wrapped up Thursday, defense attorney Francois Roux raised an issue that has noticeably impeded proceedings the last few days: translation. As the chamber finished its [questioning about M-13](#) detention camp and moved on to [interrogating Duch about S-21](#), a good deal of what was said was lost in the semi-simultaneous Khmer-English-French translation.

I hate to spend too much time dwelling on this issue, because, in many ways translation is a thankless job and it seems the translators at the court are probably stretched to their limits. However, there were numerous times this week when the entire meaning of an exchange would be lost to French and English speakers -- and, when actors in the courtroom itself had trouble understanding each other.

For example, late Wednesday afternoon Duch kept trying to explain the modes of horizontal and vertical communication available when he was chief of S-21. But "horizontal" and "vertical" kept getting bungled in the translation, relaying the exact opposite meaning of what Duch was saying to English/French speakers.

Hopefully the judges addressed this issue Thursday afternoon, when they held a session out of public view to discuss administrative matters. I'm sure the problem is largely one of resources, and I don't completely know how they will remedy that. However, I have a few simple suggestions in the meantime for improving communication and comprehension at the court:

1. Make people speak slowly. Judges and prosecutors interrupted Duch several times, asking that he slow down so translators could keep up -- but it wasn't enough. Such measures will have to be more systematically enforced.
2. Create a system whereby proper nouns can be projected for everyone in the courtroom to see. Because many of the names (of both people and places) used in testimony are in Khmer, it can be hard for non-Khmer speakers to clearly understand them and follow along.
3. Redouble efforts to find a direct Khmer-French translator. I was shocked to learn this week that there is no direct Khmer-French simultaneous translation at the court. Apparently, when

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Khmer is spoken during proceedings, it is first translated into English and then into French. I listen to the English translation and know I miss a huge amount of what is said, so I can't imagine what French speakers are getting.

I asked spokesperson Helen Jarvis about this issue today, and she said the court has been unable to find a qualified Khmer-French translator. If you know anyone who might have the necessary qualifications, urge them to apply!