Words for Amnesty

Invited to address an Amnesty International meeting, conference interpreters presented their views on what makes for effective communication.

Philip H. D. SMITH, Phillip HILL.
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Many interpreters are willing to volunteer their services to groups doing work they believe in. Some AIIC members have a long-standing relationship with Amnesty International. At a recent International Council Meeting (ICM) of AI, the people from the booths were invited to come out into the room and share some thoughts. Here is what we said.

The interpreters have been asked to make a short presentation to you. I have been chosen to speak on behalf of the team.

Forty conference interpreters have worked at this ICM. We cover the four core languages (E, F, ES and AR) and come from: Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan; France and Switzerland; Spain, Cuba, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina and Mexico, and the UK and Canada.

Melanie Roe devotes considerable time and effort to recruiting, coordinating and assigning all forty of us. Patricia in London provides solid support. Melanie also acts on site as leader-cum-trouble-shooter. She is the linchpin of the operation.

When not working for Amnesty International, we work for the main international organisations like the UN and UN agencies, the European Commission and European Parliament. We work for companies and associations and other events. A couple of us here worked, for instance, at the Lockerbie Trial.

As most of you know we work for free at ICM and other meetings held between ICMs. Amnesty covers our accommodation and board and gets us to where we have to be.

As there are forty of us, there are probably forty different reasons why we work for Amnesty. Some will have had direct experience of human rights abuses in our own families and among friends. Others believe that all should enjoy the rights they enjoy by accident of birth. These attitudes can be summarised: we believe in the cause.

I could stand here and mouth platitudes, but as this team has accumulated several years’ experience of ICMs and AI, I would like to make a serious point, which we have discussed amongst the interpreting team.

We are enthusiastic about putting our language skills to the service of a movement that does not have double standards and which cares deeply about everyone’s human rights. But as language professionals we notice some things which others may not.
Translation can often serve as an acid test of cogency. We see that texts that look good when originally drafted can easily fall apart when they cross the language barrier; they sink to the ground with the pathetic whine of a punctured party balloon.

We also see that people often conduct serious debate using insider terms that are faintly ridiculous to the un-initiated. There is an organisation which has established an umbrella training programme. I am sure that is it a worthy cause, but every time it is mentioned I can’t help conjuring up images of people struggling to put up their umbrellas under the watchful eye of an instructor.

We also observe that form can override content. They way you use language labels you. And it’s a very sticky label.

If someone slips the term “collateral damage” into his conversation, he will find it very difficult to convince you that he truly cares about the innocent victims of war, despite his vigorous assertions that he does.

If you use the competitive idiom of the market place, you may find – to your great surprise – that you are perceived as thinking like Microsoft.

Or if you use the stolid and impassive prose of globalisation, you may be perceived as speaking in the same voice as WTO.

Your actions within Amnesty speak for you, but the words you use are also part of the way you are perceived. The image language creates is involuntary.

Words can stir you or put you to sleep. They can be hard and sharp or limp and blunt. If your posters are faded and your photographs are out of focus, your impact is dramatically diminished. In the same way, if you employ words that are limp, it is much more difficult to use them to knock down the gates behind which people are deprived of their human rights.

You can all probably think of examples of lifeless language. Let us finish with a few – perhaps exaggerated – to make the point:

1. Good governance requires us to think outside the box in an enabling environment.
2. Empowerment must be factored into our game plan in the interests of a level playing field
3. Stakeholders require our approach to be top down, bottom up, top bottom and bottoms up.

Language like this will not lift people from their armchairs. Amnesty’s work is so important that Amnesty’s language should.

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