

UNspeak in Tsunami Recovery Reports

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Context

“Societies should be judged ultimately on their ability to deliver to their citizens most of their human needs: food, shelter, health, education, a clean environment, a sense of community and a sense of purpose in life,” is the verdict of a thinker from Southeast Asia, Mahhubani (1998:184).

This quotation tragically lists what thousands of Asians lost in 2004, and also what donors to tsunami relief and the government of Sri Lanka hoped to give back to the survivors. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami brought immense suffering to Sri Lanka, the pearl of the Indian Ocean. The unofficial statistics of the disaster are loss of 40,000 lives, but authoritative sources such as *The Economist*¹, claim the loss of 35,000 lives. However, the official and the unofficial statistics concur that the deaths were by and large of the very poor living in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka.

The Tsunami Recovery Reports of the second anniversary of the tsunami were published by the Sri Lankan government, various United Nations (UN) organizations, INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) such as the American Red Cross, and combined forces of donor agencies as in the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) report. This paper examines the content, strategy and techniques of these reports. The investigation is based on the premise that these reports have spawned or are in the process of spawning their own discourse for communication across borders.

Approach and methodology

The Tsunami Recovery Reports are analyzed in an eclectic approach of content and discourse analyses, within the framework of business communication theory (Bazerman & Prior 2004, Swales 2004, Munter 2002). The analysis is based on the definition of “discourse analysis as a method for analyzing the ways that specific features of language contribute to the interpretation of texts in their various contexts” (Barton, 2004: 57). Furthermore, concepts of business communication are used in the analysis. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed in terms of their usefulness for the teacher and the student.

¹ Briefing Sri Lanka: “A war strange as fiction,” *The Economist*, June 9th – 15th 2007, pp. 23-26.

Data

Of the many Tsunami Recovery Reports available, this study focuses on five reports representing two kinds of writing. This classification is based on the structure and tone of the overall message in each report.

1. Promotional writing as in the Tsunami Recovery Program report of the American Red Cross and UNICEF report or 24 Month Update.
2. Problem-Solution writing as in the TEC report named “Impact of the tsunami response on local and national capacities,” and “Approaches to Equity in Post-Tsunami Assistance,” the report of the Office of the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

The RADA (Reconstruction and Development Agency) report will also be referred to, since it has some features of both types of reports and is the government of Sri Lanka report on Tsunami Recovery, in conjunction with some donor agencies, such as the UN.

Findings

According to Mahatma Gandhi, as quoted in Chu (1998:143), “Divine guidance often comes when the horizon is ... blackest.” The overall message of the Tsunami Recovery Reports is of the blackest hour in recent history and appreciation for divine guidance in the form of abundant aid showered on the grief stricken island. Within this framework, different types of report writing can be found.

Another shared feature of the Tsunami Recovery Reports is the new discourse of NGOs, donor agencies, UN organizations, and language of governance, as demonstrated in the following extract.

The purpose of this evaluation is to ‘determine the impact of the international tsunami response on local and national capacities for relief and recovery and risk reduction.’ ...

This evaluation is based not only on consultations with formal stakeholders in government and aid agencies but also on a survey of more than a thousand claim-holders in affected communities.

(Parakrama, TEC Report 2006: 10)

In an interview with the authors of the TEC Report, the primary author, Professor Arjuna Parakrama said that the creation of the term “claim-holders” in the context of tsunami recovery reporting is a coinage, loaned from the discourse of human rights. “Claim-holders” in the tsunami relief context is used only in the TEC report.

Promotional Writing in Tsunami Recovery Reports

The American Red Cross report and the UNICEF 24 Month Update can be called promotional writing because of the focus of the reports. Just as much as they are about

tsunami recovery, they are also about themselves or the organizations they represent. Shared characteristics of these reports are as follows.

Missionary Tone & Mission Statement Style

The ‘missionary’ tone of doing good and noble deeds and embracing worthy causes is reflected in these reports, as in “The program’s mission is to build on the strengths of communities...” from the American Red Cross report, p 4.

Recovery centres on the construction and renovation of health facilities, as health and nutrition workers return to work and strengthen community-based care. UNICEF continues to support the provision of safe water and sanitary latrines, which together with the promotion of hygienic behaviour contributed to maintaining a low level of disease.

(UNICEF 24 Month Update, p. 6)

As in mission statements, purpose, strategy, values, policies and behavior standards can be identified (Campbell 1992). An example is the extract above where UNICEF gives itself a pat on the back for maintaining a low level of disease, which is part of its purpose and strategy, reflecting values and policies.

Effective Visuals

The promotional reports use some of the most moving and delightful pictures of tsunami recovery. The visual appeal is consistent with the promotional nature of the reports. Most of the pictures are either of smiling children or of adults near homes constructed by the aid organizations. The inclusion of pictures of aid workers with tsunami survivors is another common feature.

Another aspect of the use of visuals is the anecdotal style of writing. The promotional reports use anecdotes and personalized stories to match the pictures in the reports. This journalistic technique is not found in the other reports.

Positive Language

Possibly in keeping with the missionary zeal of the promotional reports, the language is very positive. An upbeat tone is created by the choice of positive vocabulary, with connotations of noble deeds and action oriented verbs, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Creation of an Upbeat Tone

Organization	Verbs	Nouns
American Red Cross	Leads, help, overcome, restored, assisted, engaged, funded, enhanced, expanded, enables, builds, prioritize, maximize, guarantees, fosters, better equipped, directs, protects, implement	New skills, survivors, significant progress, sustainable recovery, strength and resiliency, humanitarian mission, recovery programs, community participation, good stewardship, survivor needs, collaborative effort, lives and dignity,

		relief activities, satisfaction
UNICEF	Accomplished, rebuild, restoring, regain, strengthened, improving, upgrading, help ensure, supporting, expanding, create, increasing, constructed or upgraded, constructed and renovated, strengthen, established, provide, facilitate, empowering	Raising standards, much improvement, gains, better sanitation facilities, newly constructed, tremendous support, sustainable projects, restoration, promotion

As Table 1 demonstrates, the tendency is to demonstrate a sense of achievement and rebuilding as in the use of “restored,” “fosters,” and “better equipped” among the verbs and “new skills,” “newly constructed,” “good stewardship,” and “sustainable projects” among the noun phrases.

Direct Approach

Directly addressing the audience is a feature of the promotional reports. For example, the American Red Cross report ends its “Introduction” with the sentence, “Thank you for your trust in our humanitarian mission.” Similarly, it concludes with the direct appeal “You can help those affected by countless crises around the world...”

This feature of the promotional reports is in keeping with their agenda: the Tsunami Recovery Reports are one instance of accounting for the funds they have received; in the nature of their work there will be several instances of asking and accounting for aid. The problem-solution reports on the other hand, are not in the process of asking for more, they are only accounting for what has been given.

Veiled Criticism

The promotional reports seem to shy away from direct criticism. This again, is in keeping with the agenda of the organization which is dependent on the goodwill of the government and the powers that be for permission to function in a particular country. In this context, the criticism of the government for instance, is muted, and generalizations are used to mask specific critical comments.

Political uncertainties and security concerns in several tsunami-affected countries have impeded the delivery of some humanitarian assistance. However, the American Red Cross is committed to reaching people most in need, wherever they are.

(Two year report, Tsunami Recovery Program, American Red Cross, p. 23)

Problem-Solution Writing in Tsunami Recovery Reports

According to Swales and Feak (1994: 57), “... general-specific passages tend to be descriptive and expository. In contrast, problem-solution texts tend to be more argumentative and evaluative.” They also make the point that the authors of the former “position themselves

as being informed and organized; in the latter as questioning and perceptive,” (ibid). Although Swales and Feak are giving advice on academic writing to graduate students, the descriptions of the text can be used for some Tsunami Recovery Reports too.

The TEC report and the UN Special Envoy’s report on Sri Lanka use the technique of problem-solution writing. The reports also reflect the “questioning and perceptive” tone of the authors. Surprisingly, the RADA report too, uses the same technique sporadically, but the problem created by the use of this technique in a government document is, how can the authors (i.e. the government itself and donor agencies) question the government’s handling of tsunami relief funds? The critical tone of the following extract for example, highlights the problem of ‘who is the author?’ and ‘whose voice is this in a government document?’

Coordination of the stakeholders at all levels and the development of partnerships between the government and partners posed an additional challenge, as did the lack of a clear attribution of government responsibilities between division, district and central levels. The large number of stakeholders and the scope of recovery work required also led to cost inflation. Meanwhile, although the government was able to quickly restore basic services, it struggled under the pressure of the post-Tsunami demands and it is unclear to what extent it has strengthened its capacity for future planning, facilitation, monitoring, evaluation and follow-up.

(RADA Report, 2006: viii)

While lauding the government for such perceptive comments, such examples also suggest that the RADA report, although it bears the seal and approval of a government document has been authored or ‘hijacked’ to some extent by the donor agencies. It is highly unlikely that a report authored by the government of Sri Lanka, would refer to its performance as “unclear to what extent it has strengthened its capacity for future planning, facilitation, monitoring, evaluation and follow-up.”

The TEC report also provides examples of problem-solution writing, but its claims and perceptions demonstrate clear ‘ownership.’ It is the opinion of the authors based on the survey of 1000 tsunami-affected “claim-holders.”

Just as the tsunami itself was without precedent, so too was the speed, breadth and magnitude of international support for survivors in Sri Lanka. This abundance, even excess, of resources created a new experience for the international agencies engaged in the tsunami response. International nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) were able to obtain funds directly from the (first world) general public and, therefore, became less dependent on traditional (bilateral) institutional donors. Here, then, was an unprecedented opportunity to respond to this complex humanitarian emergency, without the usual debilitating resource constraints. For once, INGOs had the luxury of designing and implementing programmes as they wished, which, coupled with the learning from

Rwanda and elsewhere, provided an opportunity to demonstrate best practices in the humanitarian sector, thereby silencing critics of the international system. Thus, very early on in the crisis it became clear that the established humanitarian relief system was being tested in the crucible of the Indian Ocean Tsunami.

(Parakrama, TEC Report 2006: 9)

This extract is a sample of problem-solution writing being argumentative, evaluative, questioning, perceptive and dramatic. While the promotional reports used more pathos than these reports, this extract shows an unusual blend of appeals of logos, pathos and ethos, not generally found in the non-promotional reports dealing with the consequences in the “crucible of the Indian Ocean Tsunami.”

In addition to the problem-solution technique, these reports share the following characteristics.

Balanced Approach

An outstanding characteristic of the problem-solution reports is the balanced approach and neutral tone they adopt. This of course, lends credibility to their reporting as in the following example.

Within the tsunami IDP group, affected communities in the east and, particularly, the north have experienced a slower pace of progress than those in the south and west of the country. This pattern is, again, partially related to practical constraints, many arising from the more difficult conflict context constraining delivery in the north and east, while stronger infrastructure and private sector support has favoured faster delivery in the south.

(Grewal, UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery 2006: 2)

The balanced approach is also achieved through the use of hedging as in “a slower pace of progress,” “partially related to,” and “many arising from.”

Overt Criticism

Despite the balanced approach or because of it, the problem-solution reports are also highly critical of the government’s and donor agencies’ handling of tsunami relief. The criticism is not veiled as in the promotional reports; it is direct and hard hitting. However, it is responsible criticism which highlights both the problem and the reasons or context and subsequently provides a solution. Of the three reports discussed in this section, the TEC report is the most overtly critical and direct as the statement in the Executive Summary under “Findings” says, “Overall results of the claim-holder survey in Sri Lanka show declining satisfaction with the tsunami response,” and follows it with a Figure showing the results of the survey.

This ‘no holds barred’ approach is possibly due to two reasons: one is the strength of the report, that it is based on survey data, and is not impressionistic, and the other may be the

strategy of the donor community in financing its own tsunami recovery report, independent of government reports.

Grounded Claims

While the promotional reports too, back their claims with statistics, the problem-solution reports have the additional advantage of making evaluative comments based on the consultative approach of a survey. Both the TEC report and the UN Special Envoy's report are based on consultations with stakeholders. Therefore, comments such as the following enhance the stature of the report and give credibility to the findings because the claims are grounded on factual evidence.

By contrast, from the beginning, all former householders in the tsunami IDP group were eligible for housing assistance and by early 2006 the entire group had secured commitments to ensure that their homes were partially or fully rebuilt according to agreed minimum government standards. In addition, by early 2006 new government schemes were being rolled out to ensure that all tsunami IDPs who were previously landless would be given support to buy land and access housing assistance.

(Gerwal, UN Special Envoy Report 2006: 12)

Moralistic Tone

One of the features of the problem-solution reports is the moralistic tone they adopt. This is part of the problem-solution mode, which requires identification of errors and recommendation of solutions. Therefore, while the promotional reports display missionary zeal, these reports are more akin to showing that they occupy the high moral ground by nature of the recommending tone.

The judgmental language is reinforced with the use of "should," "must," "require," and expressions such as "It is imperative that..." The following extract reflects the moralistic tone, using the clause "what is required."

Gender-based violence is a serious concern throughout the region. The majority of programmes have adopted a 'gender neutral' or 'gender blind' policy, whereas what is required is specific targeting or affirmative action.

(Parakrama, TEC Report 2006: 17)

New Discourse

The abundance of acronyms and compound nouns in the Tsunami Recovery Reports suggests that special language is used to discuss this special situation, leading to the assumption that it is emerging discourse of the genre of report writing for international purposes. The situation is unusual because the tsunami knew no boundaries in

geographical terms, and its aftermath is somewhat similar in terms of Tsunami Recovery Reports for international consumption.

Acronyms

In addition to the internationally known acronyms such as ADB (Asian Development Bank) and HRBA (Human Rights Based Approaches) the tsunami relief and recovery efforts have spawned or given new life to another set of acronyms as listed below (from the TEC report).

Box 1: 'New' Acronyms in Tsunami Recovery Reports

CNO	Centre for National Operations
DSD	Divisional Secretary Division
GA	Government Agent
GN	Grama Niladhari
GOSL	Government of Sri Lanka
KPNDU	<i>Koralai Pattu</i> North Development Union
P-TOMS	Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure
TAFREN	Presidential Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation

Compound Nouns

In the formation of compound nouns, some nouns from other domains and contexts may have been transferred to create a different meaning in the context of tsunami recovery. Such a word is 'actor'. In the emerging discourse 'actor' seems to denote UNspeak, the language of Tsunami Recovery Reports, as shown in the following example.

The Capacities Evaluation in Sri Lanka seeks to assess how the spectrum of international actors and their national partners fared in delivering goods and services, in enhancing the access of affected populations to the relief and recovery process, and in holding themselves accountable to claim-holders.

(Parakrama, TEC Report 2006: 10)

Some of the 'new' nouns are "capacities evaluation," "international actors," "national partners," "affected populations," "relief and recovery process," "national capacities," "elite capture," "claim-holders," and "all stakeholders."

Other examples from the Tsunami Recovery Reports which suggest the emerging discourse are "capacity misrecognition," "conflict sensitivity," "breakout of expenditure," "individual interventions," "beneficiary groups," "beneficiary targets," "scaling up," "imperfect disaster response frameworks," "post-tsunami context," "tsunami IDPs," "conflict impacts," "building back better," and "lack of subsidiarity."

UNspeak

This study suggests that most of these new creations stem from the range of reports emerging from the United Nations Organization, leading to the term 'UNspeak.' This

view is substantiated by professionals² involved in consultancies and report writing for the UN. However, Professor Parakrama, the main author of the TEC report says, “In the selection of “claim holder” over ‘duty bearer,’ we felt that “claim holder” represented the human rights aspect better.” He also added that the terms ‘enabling environment’ and ‘downward accountability’ rather than ‘bottom up accountability’ were terms carefully chosen by his team to write the TEC report. The new terminology he believes is the impact of rights and stakeholder dialogue on report writing.

Pedagogical Implications

Reports have turned out to be the principal means of communication and documentation between the multiple “claim-holders” of tsunami recovery. It is the channel used by the government to account for the millions received for tsunami recovery, it is the channel used by the donors to record and account for the millions given, and it is the channel used by critics in search of accountability of tsunami funds. It is also the channel to showcase nobility on the part of the giver, and gratitude on the part of the government and donors who received unstinted aid in the wake of the tsunami. It is also the channel used by international organizations to examine the state of affairs of victims of the tsunami and conflict in Sri Lanka.

In light of the above, report writing earns its place in the curriculum of business communication courses. Furthermore, teachers and students need to be aware of at least two main kinds of report writing approaches in disaster recovery. Choice of approach and justification of choice would depend on the objective and audience of the report.

Business Communication: Audience

The Tsunami Recovery Reports analyzed in this study are written for the ‘outsider.’ In the context of tsunami recovery the outsider is the donor, the donor agency, the INGO, the NGO, the foreign government, the international media and other such forces who helped in the recovery or documented the disaster of Boxing Day 2004. The reports are for the outsider because it is the outsider (by and large) who provided the majority of funds and wherewithal for tsunami recovery. It is because of the generosity of the outsider that the reports are constructed as a means of stock taking and accountability.

As reports written for the outsider, the Tsunami Recovery Reports, including those written by the government of Sri Lanka, tabulate accounts using US \$ figures and not Sri Lankan rupees. Since the aid was given in US \$, it is logical for the accounts and documentation to follow suit, but it also reflects the acceptance that accountability is not for the citizens of Sri Lanka, it is for the outsider. The following extract from the TEC report narrates the evolution of the audience for the reports.

However, with the increase in resources came an equivalent increase in profile and public visibility. The Western public wanted to know how their money was being spent. The media followed up with detailed stories from affected areas, including assessments on the three-month and six-month anniversaries. Agencies faced pressure to scale up

² Malathie Weerasooriya, Assistant Representative UNFPA, Professor Parakrama, Head, Department of English, University of Peradeniya, Dr. Tara de Mel, former Secretary, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka

immediately in order to include new sectors, geographical areas and adopt new administrative regimes so as to spend the additional money received...

(Parakrama, TEC Report 2006: 9)

This confirms the choice of audience, “the Western public” for whom the reports were written.

From a teaching perspective, audience analysis would require a study of whose money is being accounted for and who is responsible for spending the money for what specific purpose. An analysis of the agenda of the report formulating agencies is also required because the style of writing would depend on whether they are including promotional aspects, adopting a prescriptive style or presenting accounts.

Business Communication: Channels

The choice of channel for tsunami related information is a crucial finding of this study. This finding is not confined to Tsunami Recovery Reports, but refers to the whole context of the tsunami and its aftermath.

For example, the tsunami warning system used on that fatal day in 2004 was not simply inappropriate but showed a cavalier attitude on the part of the senders. According to newspaper reports of late December 2004, a message was sent by e-mail to the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, informing the laboratory personnel that a tsunami might be heading towards Sri Lanka. This was followed by a telephone call, which was unanswered. An analysis of channel choice is a learning experience in this context. The day in question was Sunday, December 26. Sundays are holidays in most countries, and the day after Christmas is also a holiday in most former British colonies. To add to this, December 26 was a full moon day. Full moon days are holidays in Sri Lanka which observes Buddhist practice of following the lunar calendar. In such a situation, an e-mail to a university would not reach the recipient, particularly in the Third World where most people do not have home computers.

Another example of channel choice is revealing and more positive: the role of blogs in Sri Lanka. An undergraduate dissertation³ on blogging in Sri Lanka highlights the role of journalism blogs in the telecommunication breakdown after the tsunami. The blog SEA-EAT (South East Asian Earthquake and Tsunami) published messages sent from affected areas, enabling bloggers to provide useful information.

The role of blogs and their contribution to tsunami recovery are not discussed in any of the Tsunami Recovery Reports, possibly reflecting an age bias in the reports.

Another aspect of channel choice is linked to audience choice of the report writers. The Tsunami Recovery Reports analyzed in this paper have not been translated into the other languages of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamil or Malay. In the words of the TEC report, “the fact that this document still remains unshared with the communities whose very needs it

³ Undergraduate dissertation entitled ‘Discourse in the Blogosphere – An Exploration of Blogging Communities.’ University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2007.

claims to present/analyse” (TEC Report, p. 82); the same can be said of the reports themselves. The claim-holders of tsunami recovery, that is, the majority in the coastal areas are marginalized in not being part of the audience, since their knowledge of English is not adequate to reading such documents.

From a teaching perspective, sharing of information, particularly among the disadvantaged is the duty of the report writer, and this right can be discussed with students in terms of content analysis, and the purpose of business communication.

Conclusion

Tsunami Recovery Reports have been used to clear the air, in that the major recipient of aid, the government of Sri Lanka has shown its willingness to be accountable and to be criticized in UNspeak in the international arena. But in the final analysis the ordinary “claim-holder,” from the coastal areas of Sri Lanka has no access to the Tsunami Recovery Reports, and has no idea whether “bottom up accountability” or “downward accountability” shows more “beneficiary focus” enhancing “local and national capacity building” or whether s/he has appeared in the blogosphere. At the same time, if not for the Tsunami Recovery Reports, the community of donors, spanning the globe, would not be aware of crisis management at ground level, and how the millions were spent.

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Biography

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