

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Some Linguistic Aspects of Proofreading in Indian Languages

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

What Is Proofreading?

To proofread means reading printers' proofs, copy, etc. according to standard definition. However, in practice, to proofread means correcting our own errors in whatever we have written and have printed, or are about to print and submit to others to read.

A Proofreading Checklist

It is useful to have a proofreading checklist when we wish to proofread our material:

1. Have I followed the directions provided in writing this material? Or have I followed the instructions that I set for myself in writing this material?
2. Are the title page, chapter headings, paper setup (portrait/landscape), numbering, and margins in the style sheet that I followed in writing this material? Have I consistently followed these design elements?
3. Have I used consistently the same font and font-size? How about italics? How about bold fonts? Did I use them sparingly and with a definite purpose and rule in mind?

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4. Have I given the line-spacing required for the type of material I've written? Did I follow the line spacing consistently?
5. Have I omitted the use of first- and second-person point of view in my writing, especially if my material is for an audience of academics? Have I followed consistent policy relating to the use of first and second persons?
6. Are the paragraphs indented five spaces? Or indented consistently in the same way in every paragraph?
7. Have I avoided one-sentence paragraphs and lengthy paragraphs?
8. Have I cited sources in the text for direct quotations, paraphrases, and summaries?
9. Have I carefully used the bulleted lists only when this is absolutely necessary?
10. Have I listed the works cited on a reference page?
11. Have I ensured that all citations and references are in the same style sheet format for all items?
12. Have I used simple and plain language, avoided complex and lengthy sentences, and used words that are easy to understand? Have I deleted any vague or unnecessary words, such as well, okay, very, things, really, a lot of, and so forth?
13. Have I read the paper aloud to catch any grammatical or spelling errors?

You can certainly more items to the above list and keep the list with you when your write an article, a book or a report, etc.

Some Proofreading Problems in Indian Languages

While the above items are common items that can be applied across languages, there are some special features that demand some special attention when we write our material in Indian/South Asian languages.

1. Morphophonemic sandhi is a big problem for us. How do we split the compounds, how do we avoid sandhi insertions, how do we recognize the importance of the use of sandhi insertions, etc. are important questions. There does not seem to be any well-set standard even in major Indian languages. While newspapers must lead us in this area, they are also greatly confused. The very same newspaper may adopt different techniques to include/avoid sandhi as reflected in spelling, based on the assumptions of individual editors. An important source is the writings of well-established writers - both language scholars and other subject scholars. They continue to strive to

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improve the situation. However, textbooks produced by various State Textbook Boards do not seem to have any mastery over this subject. So, students are not instructed adequately in this area.

2. Most of the time, our focus is on spelling. This is good practice. However, spelling alone would not result in appropriately proofread material. For one thing, alternative spellings are available in several lexical items. As pronunciation changes, our spelling may also change. For example, although there is a difference between r and R in Tamil in writing, no such distinction is maintained in the spoken language. In addition, a tremendous merger is taking place between the six nasal consonants, each of which has its own letter in the Tamil script. It is already confusing to many writers whether to use alveolar n, dental n, or retroflex n in some words. Likewise the difference between the three laterals is fast disappearing at the spoken language level, with its consequence felt at the written level also. Then the trend (perhaps now it is arrested) to remove the *krantha* Tamil letters and use native Tamil letters in their place also adds to confusion in spelling. Tamil written by various groups of students clearly show that spelling is a major problem across all classes. In non-Tamil languages, I expect the students get confused between aspirated/non-aspirated letters, etc. Yet another problem faced in all Indian languages is how to write the borrowed words, especially from English.

3. Choice of sentence types is another major issue. Even newspapers are not able to choose sentence types appropriately to narrate the news items. The strategy adopted is to narrate or tell the story in every news item. In this strategy, unfortunately the most recent items occur only at the end, testing the patience of the readers. The writers should begin with the most recent and avoid adding a narrative part to the news items they present. However, they may also argue that this narrative/telling the story helps the less educated readers of these newspapers.

4. Subject-Verb concord is under great stress in many languages. In Hindi, the gender distinction may cause some proofreading problems here.

5. Singular-Plural distinction is another area that needs our attention. Current tendency at the spoken level is to merge these two when the verb is inflected, in Tamil.

6. In general, we need to check and control our tendency to write as we think: avoid long sentences. Use short and direct sentences. It may look and sound odd, but readability is improved if sentences are short and to the point, carrying only limited content. Gone are the days when authors were proud that they wrote a sentence that ran into several pages. What we need now is short and precise sentences without unnecessary words. Even with short sentences we can be very elegant.

7. Punctuation is a major problem when we proofread materials in Indian languages. Available conventions in this area are not really strong and binding. Most of us were not taught how to use Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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punctuation in Indian languages. We simply transferred what little we knew about punctuation in English into our Indian language writing. Once again, we notice confusion in this area even in established and popular newspapers in Indian languages. In fact, punctuation was perhaps a borrowed item from European languages. But these days punctuation is necessary to make our presentation clearer, and to communicate with ease.

8. Paragraph writing is another important element that we need to consider. Short paragraphs are always better, with each paragraph focusing on one important point. However, most Indian language writers indulge in writing long paragraphs. Our students also seem to assume that a long paragraph alone should be used to communicate important thoughts. On the other hand, there are also many successful writers who have written their materials effectively using short paragraphs.

9. How are we going to transliterate words from English? I have already touched above on this subject. However, it is a very important point to consider when you proofread. Are we going to use the transliteration in some standardized format or simply use English words as part of the Indian language text? I've noticed that many Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the North-east simply adopt English spelling for the English words they use in their text. It was easy and looked natural as these languages use the Roman Script for their writing, with significantly devised adoptions. The Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages have begun to adopt this strategy these days. Or should we simply give the English spelling in parentheses, while presenting the English word in Indian language scripts?

A Lot More to Consider

I'm sure that there are many other issues that we need to consider. A good beginning will be to develop style sheets for the textbook writers, which should be shared with the teachers. Teachers will design exercises and impart some standardized practices to our students.

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