The Bewildering Scripts of Asian Languages: Both in Roman and Non-Roman Scripts

By: Johannes Tan

Once upon a time I received an e-mail from a translation agency's owner on the West Coast saying that though he appreciated my article in a previous ATA Chronicle issue, his agency only deals with Roman-script languages, and thus will not need any Indonesian translation services in the foreseeable future. Another project manager on the East Coast once called frantically about a Malay document in a non-Roman script. When I told her that modern Malay is written in the Roman script, she insisted otherwise and faxed me the document to prove her point. To make a long story short, eventually, I found out that the document was in Malayalam instead of in Malay. Indeed, Malayalam is written in the (non-Roman) Malayalam script used in the state of Kerala in India. In a separate case, another translation agency's proprietor casually told me that she was forced to decline an 80,000 word translation project into Indonesian because "We don't have the desktop publishing capabilities to produce camera-ready text in non-Roman scripts." I assured her that Indonesian uses the Roman script and that I use a standard word-processing software. Long deafening silence...

As the three aforementioned illustrations show, Asian languages beyond Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese and Japanese have long been the source of confusion, bewilderment and headache. Many people simplistically associate Asian languages with those unusual non-Roman and worm-like scripts, despite the fact that some Asian languages do use the Roman script. Obviously, knowing the correct language spoken in a certain country is one thing; knowing the correct script to write that particular language is another thing. Understandably, many people in the translation industry, much less John and Jane Doe, develop allergy-like reactions when dealing with most Asian languages, "exotic languages," or "languages of limited diffusion."

The following list is excerpted from *Writing Systems of the World*, a rather illuminating book by Akira Nakanishi (Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan, Fourth Printing, 1994). This book describes scripts that are used all over the world -- not just in Asia. When using the list, please note that there are variations from country to country, from language to language, from script to script. The Roman script used for Turkish uses different diacritical marks than those used for Indonesian or Vietnamese. The Arabic script used for Sindhi uses more letters (twenty-four to be exact) than the standard Arabic. The Urdu script is actually the Nastaliq style of the Arabic script. The Russian script used for Kazakh uses extra letters, different from those used for Turkmen. The list only contains modern Asian languages and their scripts currently in actual use. For example, while it is true that before the Spanish invasion of the Philippines, Tagalog was written in the Tagalog script, today it is written in the Roman script.

Languages	Scripts
Arabic	Arabic
Assamese	Bengali
Bengali	Bengali
Burmese	Burmese
Chinese	Chinese
Dzongkha	Tibetan
Gujarati	Gujarati
Hebrew	Hebrew
Hindi	Devanagari
Indonesian	Roman
Japanese	Japanese
Kannada	Kannada
Kashmiri	Urdu
Kazakh	Russian
Khmer	Cambodian
Korean	Korean
Kurdish	Arabic
Kyrgyz	Russian
Laotian	Laotian
Malayalam	Malayalam
Malay	Roman
Maldivian	Maldivian
Marathi	Devanagari
Mongolian	Mongolian
Nepali	Devanagari
Oriya	Oriya
Pashtu	Arabic
Persian	Arabic
Punjabi	Gurmukhi
Sindhi	Arabic
Sinhalese	Sinhalese
Tajik	Russian
Tagalog	Roman
Tamil	Tamil
Telugu	Telugu
Tetum	Roman
Thai	Thai
Turkish	Roman
Turkmen	Russian
Urdu	Urdu
Uzbek	Russian
Vietnamese	Roman

Besides working as an English <> Indonesian translator and conference interpreter, Johannes Tan is also a cross-cultural analyst and linguistic consultant for several federal agencies and many Fortune 100 companies, translation companies and research centers in the USA, Canada and Indonesia. He has been an English <> Indonesian translator since 1973, is an ATA-active member and resides in Portland, Oregon. This article was originally published in the Nov/Dec 1996 issue of the ATA Chronicle. Revised and updated in 2015.