**Ban saves face by tampering transcripts**

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When U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gets exasperated with the press, he has a habit of repeating a phrase over and over again for emphasis. But you would never know it by reading the U.N. record of Ban's press encounters. Repetition has been expunged.

Ban's aides conduct a sweeping reworking of their leader's remarks in the official transcript that is distributed to reporters after his press conferences. A recent comparison of the U.N. transcript of an August 9 press conference with a verbatim version showed more than 225 fixes. Only a handful of errors, about 15, were marked with brackets to indicate something had been rewritten.

Most of the changes -- a deleted article or preposition here, a mangled sentence or grammatical error there -- are simply designed to make a Korean national with halting English sound more fluent in the U.N.'s power language. But in the process, they change the historical record of one of the most important diplomatic leaders of the day and deprive readers and other U.N. watchers of authenticity.

But the process is not simply cosmetic. The transcription process has also been used to correct mistakes, and in some cases, to help the U.N. chief recover from a public gaffe. For instance, when Ban referred to the importance of a 2009 Security Council summit -- hosted by President Barack Obama -- on "nuclear disarmament," his copy editor scrapped the word nuclear, presumably because the meeting also addressed efforts to eliminate biological and chemical weapons.

U.N. officials say that they have always made some small changes to make the formal transcript more readable, and that they even improve the grammatical mistakes of journalists so they sound more articulate than they really are. Even former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, an effective public speaker, was given to muddling an occasional sentence, backing up, and starting over again. The bad parts were scrapped.

"It's been standard practice to make some minor changes basically with grammar and usage to make the transcript more easy to read," said Farhan Haq, a spokesman for Ban. "We strive for accuracy and we put any substantive words that are added clearly marked in brackets. We also make both the audio and video available on web cast so that the permanent record is there."

Not all the changes work to Ban's advantage. In one sentence in the Aug. 9 press conference, Ban correctly acknowledges that the international community "may not be able" to conclude a legally binding agreement limiting greenhouse in an upcoming meeting in Cancun, Mexico. But the copy editor goofed, saying Ban "may not able" to secure such a pact.

There was another line in the press conference that he perhaps wished he hadn't uttered. Questioned about the authority of a U.N. panel looking into Israel's May 31 commando raid on a Turkish aid flotilla, Ban denied he had struck a secret deal that would prohibit the panel from asking Israeli soldiers to testify. "There was no such agreement behind the scenes," Ban said. But Ban's assertion triggered a terse response from the Israeli government. "Israel will not cooperate with, and will not participate in, a panel that demands to investigate Israeli soldiers," said Mark Regev, spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Perhaps the most egregious fix came after a reporter asked Ban if he had improperly promised a South African national a job as the chief of the U.N.'s internal investigation division. The South African, whose name has not been made public, had been on a short list of candidates for the post of U.N. under secretary general for internal oversight, which oversees the U.N.'s internal auditing and investigations divisions. But the job was given instead to a former World Bank auditor, Carman Lapointe-Young of Canada.

U.N. rules give Lapointe-Young, who will take up the new job next month, authority to recruit three candidates to fill the investigations post. But in his response to the reporter, Ban appeared to confirm that he had already begun considering the South African candidate for the investigations post as a consolation, a move that would have undercut Lapointe-Young's independence. Ban verbatim quote was: "If he would be willing to take that job, I was, for me, I was ok to fill that post." Ban then went on to explain that it was not unusual for the United Nations to hire a qualified candidate, once passed over for a senior post, for a more junior position.

Immediately after the press conference, Ban's spokesman issued a "clarification" saying that Ban wanted to "make it absolutely clear" that the recruitment process for the investigations post would not begin until Lapointe-Young began her work. "The assertion that a South African was offered the job is completely unfounded," the statement said. Privately, senior U.N. aides said that Ban had been confused by the question and that what he meant to say was that he had been prepared to hire the South African for Lapointe-Young's job, but that he had turned it down. The aides said neither of two candidates under consideration for Lapointe-Young's job were in fact interested in the more junior post.

The transcript of the day's press conference was amended to bolster that argument. So instead, of saying Ban was happy to hire the candidate, presumably at some time in the future, "if he would be willing to take the job," it suggested that Ban had previously shown an interest in hiring the South African. "If he [had been] willing to take the job, then I was okay [for him] to fill that post," the U.N. transcript stated.

But alas, with so much work, some mistakes are likely to fall through the cracks. In an effort to defend his record on accountability, Ban took credit for creating the U.N.'s first ethics office. "Can you believe it?" he said.

Actually, no. The U.N. ethics office, an initiative of Ban's predecessor Kofi Annan, which was endorsed at a 2005 UN summit of world leaders, was established in January, 2006, a year before Ban took office.