

Lexicon of a leader

What challenges does the language of Donald Trump pose for translators and interpreters? Yelena McCafferty picks apart some of his phrases



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Simple words, punchy phrases, highly emotional connotations... the language style of Donald Trump has been the subject of much discussion in recent months. Translators and interpreters have flocked to the internet to express their frustration at the difficulty of rendering his messages and speeches into other languages. But how rare is having to translate the words of a political leader whose manner of speaking falls somewhat outside widely expected standards? In fact, history shows us that it's not unusual at all. If you just look at Soviet and Russian leaders, for example (the language I work with), there are many examples.

But first, Trump. What exactly is it about his manner of speaking that makes translators wince? He uses very simple words, such as 'nice', yet strong phrases, aiming for maximum impact. In his discourse, he may also shift from subject to subject if the first one isn't going to lead him to ending on an emotive note. In his utterances, he often appears to dilute logic. The same technique is true for his tweets, which often end on a one-word sentence: 'Sad.'

Siavash Ardalan, a journalist and a translator for BBC Persian, has commented that to understand Trump, you need to become Trump – including mimicking his gestures. Trump uses sarcasm and jokes, and there is never a guarantee that he is being 100 per cent serious. Take his 'bad dudes out there', for example. It's important to find the right level of colloquialism when translating a phrase like this. The interpreter or translator has to think about tone and context as well as meaning, and translate the phrase

so that the message stays true to the speaker's original intention.

Register of language

Trump's register of language is quite different from that of most Western leaders. 'We did have a lot of fun fighting Hillary,' he commented after his election victory; 'fun fighting' isn't quite an oxymoron, but it is an interesting figure of speech. 'America will start winning again bigly' is another example: lots of people, including me, who heard Trump say 'bigly' for the first time, assumed it was a neologism. Yet we were wrong – it can, in fact, be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. 'Bigly' can mean

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'with great force', and has been employed by writers such as Thomas Hardy, who uses it in *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

Trump is not shy of using mildly vulgar slang, either: 'We had people running our country who didn't know what the hell they were doing, didn't know what they were doing.'

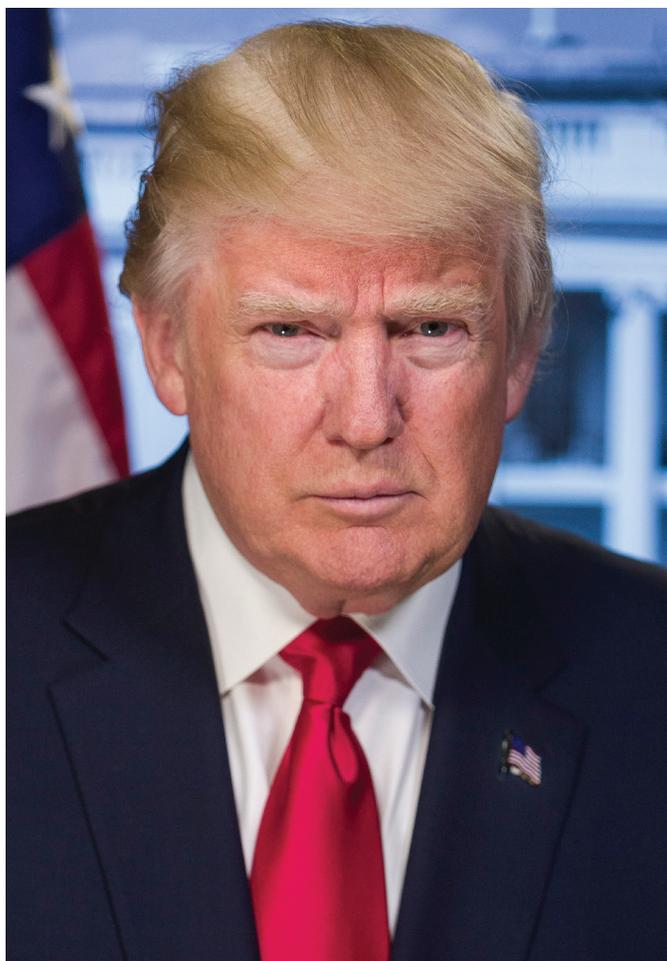
In his social media messages, to compensate for the absence of vivid gestures and tone of voice, Trump uses block capitals and conspicuous punctuation, such as double dashes, dots and exclamation marks. A good

example is one of his Facebook posts: 'GREAT meeting with Manufacturing CEOs at the White House this past week. The three most powerful words in every market, in every corner of the globe -- will be back again in no time... MADE IN USA!' He sounds confident, tough and resolute. Yet he is prone to repetition and exaggeration. Interpreters appreciate speakers who use well-structured syntax, but Trump often gives us a headache by breaking his sentences off.

Donald Trump's unpolished speech is not dissimilar to that of a few other charismatic leaders, especially from the USSR and Russia. In 2002, during a news conference, Vladimir Putin took a hard line on Chechen separatists by saying: 'If you want to become an Islamic radical and have yourself circumcised, I invite you to come to Moscow. Our nation is multi-confessional, we have experts in the area. I would recommend that whoever does the surgery does it so you'll have nothing growing back afterwards.' (In Russian: 'Если же вы готовы стать самым радикальным исламистом и готовы сделать себе обрезание, приглашаю вас в Москву. У нас многоконфессиональная страна, у нас есть специалисты и по этому вопросу. И я порекомендую сделать операцию таким образом, чтобы у вас уже ничего не выросло.') I watched the broadcasts of the conference through various sources and heard one interpreter struggling to render this comment during live TV coverage. Linguistically, the passage wasn't particularly complicated, but the theme clearly took the interpreter by surprise and he couldn't complete the president's remark.

Angry outbursts

Back in 1960 at the UN General Assembly, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had several angry outbursts, pounding the table with both fists and saying 'Мы вам покажем кузькину мать'. This



is a Russian idiomatic expression which means 'We'll show you what is what'. However, apparently during the live interpreting session it was conveyed word for word as 'We'll show you Kuzma's mother', which wouldn't have made much sense to the uninitiated.

Another Soviet leader's speaking style is remembered for being very slow and monotonous, to such an extent that there were jokes going around about it. Leonid Brezhnev was presiding over the USSR during the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. One of the jokes goes that Brezhnev started his address to the Olympians with O! O! O! O! O!, only to be corrected by the assistant whispering that the Olympic rings didn't need to be read out. Considering his usual manner of speaking, no one might have noticed the blunder, even if the joke had been based on a true story.

Boris Yeltsin was notorious for his linguistic gems, too. His language was simple, he spoke slowly and he favoured comparisons and figurative

Trump's casual and emotionally charged language can be difficult to translate

language. Referring to Japan's Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, he once said: 'Не стесняйтесь, так сказать, свой интеллект пополнить здесь японским интеллектом. Я вот сколько контактируюсь вот лично с Рю, так и то чувствую, что становлюсь умнее.' This translates as 'Don't be shy, so to speak, about enriching your intellect here with Japanese intellect. I have been in personal contact with Ryu a number of times and even I feel I am getting cleverer.' It's clumsy, at best. Mikhail Gorbachev, widely respected in the West, once said: 'Я вам отвечу по-горбачевски. Вы знаете, что это будет сложнее, чем простой ответ,' meaning 'I'll respond to you the Gorbachev way; it will be more complicated than a simple answer'.

Suddenly the challenge of translating Trump doesn't seem

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so unprecedented. No matter whose language we are working with, we instinctively feel concerned if the target message sounds linguistically awkward, funny or illogical. We also worry that listeners and readers will doubt that we have translated everything correctly. Orators who are less predictable than most can throw first the translator, then the readership.

During the first months of Trump's term as president, foreign leaders and policy makers will be paying attention literally to his every word, and the pressure on translators and interpreters to get it right is immense. For perfectionists, it is difficult to resist the urge to clean up and polish speech that sounds disjointed or too colloquial. And some colleagues will argue this neutralisation will prevent them from sounding stupid. I analysed the Russian translation of Donald

Trump's inauguration speech and found it to be very accurate: it had the same register, the same repetitions with no deviations, and no flowering of the language.

Approachability

As a matter of fact, quite a few political observers believe that one of the things which brought Trump to power is his simplicity and approachability, regardless of the voter's education or background. This reinforces our responsibility as translators to reflect his original style to the best of our ability. Trump's uncensored and off-the-cuff rhetoric has been attractive to his support base, and to draw another parallel with Russia, according to a recent survey, a growing number of Russians want Putin to have a personal Twitter account, too. Although the Russian president has an official Twitter feed, the public is keen to know the president's opinion on all public matters, in the same way that American voters have direct access to Trump in this way.

It's obvious that during the next four years of Trump as US President, linguistic issues will continue to crop up. As professional translators and interpreters, we may need to work on developing the skill of dismissing the fear of sounding too colloquial. Richard Newman, a speech and body language expert, has said that to translate Trump, you almost need someone who is an actor, because unless you physically embody the gestures as you say the words, the meaning is going to get lost in translation. Newman observes that when Trump thinks his strong message is flowing well as he speaks, he starts doing a 'thread-the-needle' gesture (placing his index finger and thumb together as if holding a thin thread) and bashing the air. When he becomes dismissive and goes into a palms-up gesture, Trump's body language again helps the interpreter realise the tone in the target language needs to be changed as the conversation has taken a different turn.

With time, the world, including linguists, will get used to Trump's verbal idiosyncrasies. They are certainly not something we haven't seen or heard before on the political stage.