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# Translation Is New Weapon in Propaganda War

By Michele A. Berdy

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*Мазохи́зм: masochism*

Here at The Moscow Times language desk, we've written a lot about gaffes in the translation and interpretation of official statements over the years. Once upon a time, those mistakes were just that — mistakes. And only translation nerds were interested in the nuances. Those days are gone. Now translation is just one more weapon in the propaganda wars.

The first and most common misuse of translation is by omission: cherry-picking phrases from a speech or report in order to distort the overall message. This has been standard practice with the reports on human rights presented every year by the U.S. State Department to Congress.

What? You haven't heard of them? They aren't reported much in the American media —

in fact, they are probably read only by the parents of the interns who wrote them and one librarian in Biloxi, Mississippi. But in Russia they are always big news: Новый доклад Госдепа США о демократии: в России и Белоруссии происходит "эрозия демократических принципов." (The new U.S. State Department democracy report: Erosion of Democratic Principles in Russia and Belarus.) Then the article cites only the criticism. All the good bits and praise — "there were also positive developments with regard to human rights" — are left out.

The second technique is exaggeration — choosing the most inflammatory way to translate a word or phrase. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney's description of Russia as America's "geopolitical foe" got translated much more insultingly as "врагом номер один" (number one enemy). And when U.S. President Barack Obama spoke before Congress a few weeks ago and said that Russia was isolated "with its economy in tatters," Russian commentators translated the idiom literally as "разорвана в клочья" (torn to pieces). To my ear, the phrase "in tatters" is pretty strong, but the Russian translation makes it sound like fighting words.

No wonder another Russian commentator cranked it up a notch: Барак Обама выразился конкретно — порвёт Россию, как Тузик грелку. (Barack Obama expressed himself precisely — he's going to tear Russia apart like a dog rips apart a rubber toy.)

The third mistranslation technique is plain old invention. In his statement about Russia, Mitt Romney said, "... of course the greatest threat that the world faces is a nuclear Iran, and nuclear North Korea is already troubling enough ..." But Russians read that he said this: "Сегодня именно Россия, а не Иран и КНДР, является геополитическим врагом для США" (Today it is Russia, and not Iran or North Korea, that is the geopolitical enemy of the U.S.)

For the best example of translation invention, ask your Russian friends and neighbors about State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki. They will quote word for word her most famous statement: Если Белоруссия вторгнется на Украину, шестой флот США будет немедленно переброшен к берегам Белоруссии. (If Belarus attacks Ukraine, the U.S. 6th fleet will immediately land on the shores of Belarus.) The only problem? The whole thing is фейк (fake). Psaki never said anything remotely like this.

The point of all this misuse of translation seems to be to make Western leaders sound far more antagonistic to Russia than they are. Just listen to them! They insult us! They hate us! They're so mean to us!

Oh, that delicious feeling of righteous indignation. How dare they?!

But here's the weird thing: These Russian mistranslations make Russians feel terrible about themselves and their country. It's translation masochism. Why would anyone want to feel that way?

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