

Meester Trump Tweets in Russian

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Твит: tweet (on Twitter)

For the last couple of months I've put myself in translation jail: I've been reading Donald Trump's tweets in the original English (or what passes for English in Trump's night-time missives to the world) and in their Russian translation(s). My goal: to figure out if the secret of his popularity in Russia is due to how he sounds in Russian.

Tentative conclusion: Yes. Trump sounds much better in Russian than he does in English. Whether for clarity, out of a tradition of cleaning up leaders' speech, or out of political affinity, translators eliminate Trump's repetitions, tidy up the thoughts that trail off into nowhere, and raise the tone to a more presidential level.

For example, the agreement on immigrants with Australia wasn't a "dumb deal" in Russian. It was the more forceful чёртова сделка (a damned deal). Mexicans weren't

“bad hombres.” They were шайка плохих парней (a gang of bad guys), as if Trump was referring to a drug cartel, not random fellows from south of the border.

Trump’s meandering statements are generally cleaned up. For example, he said: They have sanctions on Russia — let’s see if we can make some good deals with Russia. For one thing, I think nuclear weapons should be way down and reduced very substantially, that’s part of it. In Russian it is: Они [страны Запада] наложили санкции на Россию. Давайте посмотрим, сможем ли мы заключить какие-то хорошие сделки с Россией. Я думаю, начнем с того, что ядерное оружие должно быть очень значительно сокращено. The back-translation shows a more coherent Trump: They (Western countries) have sanctioned Russia. Let’s see if we can make some good deals with Russia. I think we should start by significantly reducing nuclear arms.

Trump also sounds more grown-up in Russian. His recent comment about President Putin was: Don’t know him, but certainly he is a tough cookie, and I don’t know how he’s doing for Russia but we’re going find out one day, I guess. In

Russian translation: Я не знаю его лично, но, очевидно, он крепкий орешек. Я не знаю, каков он для России, но рано или поздно, думаю, мы это выясним. This is back-translated as: I don’t know him personally, but it’s clear that he’s tough. I don’t know how he’s been for Russia, but sooner or later I think we’ll find out.

Trump’s shorthand Twitter verdicts sound less childish in Russian, sometimes just thanks to Russian grammar:

Terrible! is Чудовищно! (It’s monstrous!) or Ужасно (It’s terrible!). Sad! becomes

Печально! (It’s sad!) — although I dearly want it to be translated

as the snarky Печалька! Sometimes there is a clarifying translation. Weak! written about President Obama, was Слабак! (Weakling!) in one translation.

Sometimes the Russian press just avoids Trump’s tweets and off-the-cuff remarks and sticks with press releases or official statements instead. The result is that Russians are often puzzled by criticism of the U.S. president. They read: Трамп подписал указ, предусматривающий ужесточение иммиграционной политики... и запрещающий въезд гражданам стран, вызывающих “особую озабоченность” (Trump signed an order that tightened the immigration policy... banning entry to citizens of countries that are of “special concern”). What’s the problem with that?

The Russian press may be less enamored of Trump lately, but you can’t tell that from how he’s translated. But there is another problem: figuring out what he means.

That’s next week. Stay tuned.

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