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Trouble Translating Trump

By Michele A. Berdy

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Захват: seizure, capture

What we⊠translators don't do for our profession! For months now I've been studying⊠Donald Trump in English and in translation to try to discover the secret of his⊠popularity among Russians. As I discovered last week, President Trump can thank⊠Russian translators for making him sound more presidential, more coherent, and⊠more grown-up in Russian.

Now that is⊠not to say that translating The Donald has been smooth sailing for my Russian⊠colleagues. They are sometimes clearly befuddled by Trumpese. For example, the⊠translators had a hard time understanding what Trump told the Republicans to do⊠if the Democrats tried to filibuster his nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the⊠Supreme Court. "If we end up with that gridlock I would say if you can,⊠Mitch, go nuclear," he said.

The⊠translators wisely ignored the direct quote and put their hopes on a⊠paraphrase. If

negotiations broke down, they wrote, в арсенале республиканцов имеется "ядерный вариант" (the Republicans have the “nuclear option” in their arsenal). That’s a pretty good translation — it is colorful and reads well. The only problem? Average Russian readers — heck, above-average English readers — would have absolutely no idea what that nuclear option is. Are the Republicans going to drop a nuclear bomb on the Democrats? No people, no problem?

In another case, translators clearly didn’t have a Middle Eastern expert nearby or easy access to Wikipedia. Trump tweeted, “Iran is rapidly taking over more and more of Iraq,” and no one could figure out if the take-over was literal or figurative. Throwing geopolitical caution into the wind, one translated it as Иран быстро захватывает Ирак (Iran is quickly occupying Iraq). Another translator at another publication agreed, and in fact thought the phrase needed some drama: Иран быстро поглощает все больше и больше Ирака (Iran is quickly swallowing up more and more of Iraq).

But other translators thought there was a war of influence being waged: Иран имеет все больше влияние на территории Ирака (Iran has more influence on Iraqi territory) or Иран устанавливает все более ощутимый контроль над территориями Ирака (Iran is establishing more palpable control over Iraqi territory). So depending on what Russian publication you were reading, Trump was either accusing Iran of grabbing land in Iraq or exerting soft power.

Most amusingly, sometimes Russian publications seem to forget what language Trump speaks.
Take this recent tweet about Crimea: For eight years Russia "ran over"
President Obama, got stronger and stronger, picked-off Crimea and added missiles.

For some reason, a slew of translators — or perhaps it was the Russian media they worked for — became obsessed with the phrase “picked-off” (sic).
Трамп подобрал новое
слово для перехода Крыма к России (Trump chose a new word for the transfer of Crimea to Russia). Раньше он назвал его “захватом” (Before he called it a land grab.) One publication claimed that because of his use of the word
захват он потерял симпатии
российского телевидения (he lost popularity with Russian television).

So what new word did Trump use?
Перехватить. The word can mean intercepting someone
or something — getting it first. Here the implication is: Russia grabbed Crimea before the Americans could.

That is, indeed, a highly significant admission by the U.S. President.

But wait a minute. Donald Trump doesn’t speak Russian. He didn’t write
захват or
перехват. He wrote “picked-off.”

Unless... they know something we don’t? Maybe Trump’s problems with English are because

he’s really a native speaker of Russian? Hold onto your hats.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of “The Russian Word’s Worth,” a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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