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How to Interpret a President

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Mikhail Metzel / TASS

Погибнуть: to die an unnatural or violent death

After the Russian president gives a big speech or holds a press conference, I usually like to analyze what he said from the point of view of language use — words that are repeated, unusual phrases, and the folksy expressions — sometimes obscure — that were typical of Vladimir Putin's earlier speeches. This week I've got several hundred pages of transcripts of statements, interviews, and press conferences in Russian and English, and it's going to take me a while to get through them all.

But in the meantime, there have been a lot of complaints about the interpretation, both into English and into Russian, by what appears to be people who know (or think they know) both languages but who have (apparently) never translated or interpreted in their lives. So first I thought I'd pull the curtain back, as it were, on how interpreters work.

I have worked as both a simultaneous and consecutive interpreter. My simultaneous interpreting experience was, frankly, insane. Without any training I discovered I could do it and spent nearly a decade in television journalism interpreting simultaneously two 3-hour filmed interviews a day while also working as the field producer. I got to the point where I could write notes like "позвони в ресторан, мы опаздываем" (call the restaurant we're running late) without breaking stride in my interpreting and hold it out from under the blanket I sat under (in lieu of a proper booth), waving it until one of the techies grabbed it. It was the most exhausting, stressful and probably brain-damaging work I ever did.

I much preferred consecutive interpreting, although that could be stressful from time to time, too. I would work with the person I was interpreting before an event, explaining that interpretation works best when they pause every sentence or so for me to speak. But people forget. They get nervous, especially on stage, and run on for five minutes or so (the equivalent of about 2 typed pages of text) before remembering to stop. When they do, there you stand looking at 3,000 people in the audience, praying no clothing has slipped indecently, revving up to project your voice since the audio system just went down (naturally), and begin to speak. As you glance down at your notes and pause a nano-second before continuing, there is always a guy in the first row — sorry, gentlemen, but in my experience, it's always a man — who shouts out the word as you pause. And throughout the entire speech, the Gotcha Guy sits there, screaming out "Integrity!" "Deforestation!" "Movie theaters!" You want to jump off the stage and smack the guy.

In the past few days since the summit, there are a lot of Gotcha Guys out there, sneering at the interpreters for missing allusions, not getting idioms right and mistranslating words.

Idioms are not an interpreter's friend. Let's say you are interpreting for the head of a delegation that got delayed at an airport and arrived just as an event begins. Her first words are, "О! Прямо с корабля на бал!" (literally "straight from the ship to a ball"). You know this phrase and give in to temptation. You say, "Well, we've certainly hit the ground running!" Everyone smiles. You feel like a genius. And then she says, "И какой шикарный бал!" (And what a magnificent ball this is!) You short-circuit trying to come up with a way to turn "ground" into something wonderful. If you are lucky, you might come up with "And this is certainly ground-zero for a celebration" and pray she doesn't continue with the metaphor. You best bet is to translate the phrase literally with "as they say in Russian/English…" and add an explanation, if you can manage it. But that's easier to do in consecutive interpreting than in simultaneous.

Allusions are even worse for interpreters. They are hard to catch and even harder to deal with, since the point might not be the words but the mood or emotion evoked. You always tell speakers not to use them, but sometimes they do anyway.

In his interview with Kier Simmons at NBC News, Putin responded to several cited accusations about cyberattacks: "…доказательства-то где? На такие бездоказательные обвинения я могу Вам ответить: можете жаловаться в Международную лигу сексуальных реформ."

Imagine you're the interpreter. You are listening and speaking at the same time, and so you come out with: "Where is proof? With— when there is— when there are charges— without—

evidence, I can tell you, you can take your complaint to the International League of Sexual Reform."

How are you to know that this is a quote — in fact, not even an exact quote — from Ilf and Petrov's "The Golden Calf"? And even if you did know it, and even if you realized it meant something like "If you aren't happy, take it up with the management" – it's risky to say it. What if he then follows up with a joke about international organizations or sexuality or reform movements?

One of these Gotcha Guys also complained about another phrase Putin used: "что-то с памятью моей стало" (there's something wrong with my memory). This is from the song "For That Guy" played in every series of "Seventeen Moments of Spring," he wrote. "Why didn't the interpreter recognize it? Why didn't they put it in quotation marks in the transcript?" he wanted to know.

This would be like Joe Biden saying that someone had "set sail that day for a three-hour tour" to describe an unexpected disaster — and then some Gotcha Guy being outraged that the Russian interpreter didn't know the theme song to the television show "Gilligan's Island."

There was another Gotcha Guy who complained that the interpreter improperly translated a section when Putin spoke about Mikhail Lesin, a media executive who was found dead in his hotel room in the U.S. Putin said that he knew and liked him, and then: Погиб он в США, умер или погиб ◙ я не знаю... This was translated: "He died— he perished or died in the United States. I'm not sure if he perished or died." The Gotcha Guy insisted погиб meant "killed" not "perished."

I have to admit that this gave me pause, and I ran to my dictionaries. Погибнуть is defined as: подвергаться уничтожению (обычно при катастрофе, бедствии и т.п.), умирать неестественной, насильственной смертью (to be destroyed [usually in a catastrophe, disaster etc.]; to die an unnatural, violent death). Does it always mean "to be killed"? Not necessarily. Он погиб на войне (He died in the war) could mean he was killed by a soldier on the other side, or it could mean that he drowned when the ship he was on went down, and so on.

But here, in this context, when погиб and умер (died) are used as different forms of death, it's clear he means "not sure if he was killed or died." So, is "perished" wrong?

Not really. It is defined almost exactly the way погибнуть is defined: "to suffer death, typically in a violent, sudden, or untimely way." The only tricky bit is that the word has a note: "mainly literary." Russian translators tend to ignore that note and use it as the equivalent of погибнуть, but today's native English speakers often don't use the word in that sense anymore.

Well, I will continue to paw through these transcripts looking for interesting and revealing phrases. And in the comfort and ease of my home, dressed in my most disreputable sweats, with no one watching or listening to me, I hope I'll be able to come up with some good translations and explanations. But in the meantime, I take my hat off to the interpreters on both sides.

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