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MORNING MIX

‘Make America big again’? The headache of translating Trump into foreign languages.

By Samantha Schmidt

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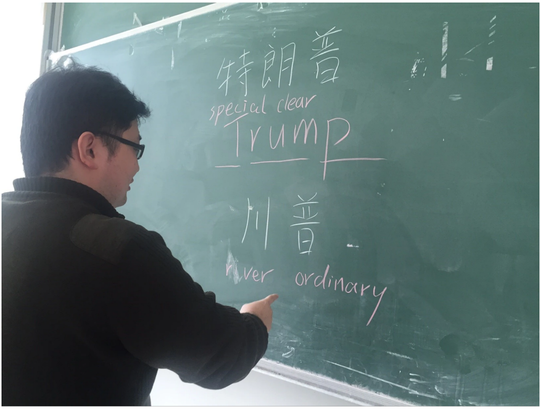

Two versions of Donald Trump’s surname in Chinese, written on a chalk board. The first is said “te-lang-pu,” or, literally, special-clear-ordinary. The second is “chuan-pu,” literally river-ordinary. By Emily Rauhala.

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When the video was released capturing Donald Trump making lewd comments about women, news outlets across the country struggled with how to present the crude words.

“Grab them by the p—y,” Trump said in the recording, The Washington Post reported. “You can do anything.”

Around the world, reporters and translators dealt with a more complex dilemma: how to make sense of the shocking conversation in a different language.

In Chinese, for example, one language expert, David Moser, has argued there is no obvious way to say the word “p—y.” Some news outlets published more sanitized versions using references to “private places.”

“You can even play with their nether parts; anything goes,” was the rough translation in one Chinese media outlet.

Others opted for simply including the censored English word, “use p—y to grab them.” It’s fair to say this led to a decent amount of confusion among non-English speakers. And when Trump defended his conversation as “locker-room talk,” many people of non-Western cultures likely asked the question: What does “locker-room talk” even mean?

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Since the beginning of his political rise, Trump’s remarks have been translated into a slew of languages worldwide, and his official swearing-in only elevates the power of his words. For some, his simple vocabulary and grammatical structure make his speeches easy to follow. But for others, his confusing logic, his tendency to jump quickly from topic to topic and his lack of attributions for so-called facts make his remarks sound like a puzzling jumble, and that creates a headache when translating Trump’s speeches for non-English audiences.

Bérengère Viennot, a professional French translator, said in a recent interview with the Los Angeles Review of Books that Trump’s broken syntax, often limited vocabulary and repetition of phrases make it difficult to create texts that read coherently in French, a very structured and logical language.

“Most of the time, when he speaks he seems not to know quite where he’s going,” Viennot said. “It’s as if he had thematic clouds in his head that he would pick from with no need of a logical thread to link them.”

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She is left with a dilemma: either translate Trump exactly as he speaks — and let French readers struggle with the content — or keep the content, but smooth out the style, “so that it is a little bit more intelligible, leading non-English speakers to believe that Trump is an ordinary politician who speaks properly.”

[Trump's grammar in speeches 'just below 6th grade level,' study finds]

In Japanese, a structural challenge also exists when translating Trump's words. Agness Kaku, a professional translator based in Tokyo who has worked for a number of politicians, said in an interview with The Post that English is a subject-prominent language — understanding a sentence in English involves pinning down who or what the subject is. Japanese, on the other hand, requires tracking the *topic* of a conversation.

In Trump's remarks, Kaku said, the subject is very easy to keep track of — "it's about him, it's about the enemy." But the actual topic or point of his sentences is often difficult to grasp, complicating Japanese translations. "It just drifts," she said. "You end up having to guess as a translator, which isn't very good. You shouldn't have to guess."

As an example, she mentioned Japanese translations of Trump's comments about why Khizr Khan's wife, Ghazala, didn't speak during her husband's speech at the Democratic National Convention: "His wife — if you look at his wife, she was standing there, she had nothing to say, she probably, maybe she wasn't allowed to have anything to say, you tell me, but plenty of people have written that," Donald Trump said on ABC News.

Japan's public broadcaster, NHK, eliminated much of Trump's rambling in its account, which translated roughly to, "She likely wasn't allowed to give a statement." CNN Japan went even further in its translation, "It could be she wasn't allowed to speak." The result, Kaku said, turned the rambling, unframed implication into a much clearer accusation.

"There were quite a few things going on in the statement and a lot of that was lost," Kaku said. "You have to cut so much in order to deliver something that isn't complete nonsense."

The most instrumental phrase in Trump's rhetoric — his slogan, "Make America Great Again" — creates a grammatical and semantic mess for

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translators in some languages, according to an article in the Spanish newspaper El País.

In Spanish, for example, one intuitive translation, "Haz América grande otra vez," could also come across as "Make America big again," or "Do America great again."

To make matters worse, most Spanish-speakers — and Portuguese speakers — believe "América" usually implies the whole of the Americas, not just the United States.

This became an important distinction for Renato Geraldes, a professional interpreter in Brazil who translated Trump's inauguration address into Portuguese for Brazilian television. In Trump's closing words, the president gave several variations of his campaign slogan, ending with, "And yes, together we will make America great again."

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Geraldes, interpreting live on television, was forced to speak very quickly during these final lines, since the interpretation in Portuguese became much clunkier and longer, along the lines of "together, we will turn the United States into great again."

However, the speech was not quite as difficult to interpret as it could have been, Geraldes said in an interview with The Post. Based on Trump's previous speeches, Geraldes worried Trump would veer off-topic, following his usual scattered way of speaking. Geraldes, who has also interpreted Barack Obama's speeches, said Obama was unparalleled in his public speaking, in large part because he had a natural ability to guide audiences through the speech. The unpredictability of Trump's speeches makes it challenging to interpret off the cuff.

"Obama structures his speeches so that one idea leads to another very logically. There is a beginning, middle and end," Geraldes said. "Trump is like all over the place."

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Geraldes also worried Trump would give derogatory remarks in his speech, such as words he would use to describe immigrants during his

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“It’s not something I would like to say personally, but being an interpreter you have to become whoever you are interpreting,” Geraldes said. “If he says he hates someone, you have to say it with the same tone, and you have to be equally convincing.”

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He thought back to Trump’s comment calling Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman.” If tasked with translating that remark, he wondered, how far should he go in his own language to convey the word “nasty?”

“Whenever you are conveying a feeling, you really have to understand what a person means,” he said.

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On the other hand, Geraldes did acknowledge that Trump’s simple, clearly punctuated language actually makes translating some of his speeches easier than other, more complex political speeches.

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Juliane House, professor of linguistics at Hellenic American University in Athens and the former president of the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies, agreed. Translating any text or speech is difficult, she said.

“You always lose something — languages are not identical,” House said in an interview with The Post. “But you can always overcome this limitation by explaining a word if it doesn’t fit. You don’t have to identify with the speaker.”

The key is simply to leave certain terms in English in brackets, while including further explanation in the translated language, even if it’s clunky. “The translator is not an author; she is basically a servant to the text,” House said.

One aspect of the translating dilemma for Viennot, the French translator, might be exacerbated by culture, as Viennot herself explained. In France, she said, “we are used to hearing or reading people who take a lot of care in what they say — and when they don’t, when they utter something with a double meaning or that could be misinterpreted, everybody sees it.”

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“So you can imagine that if Trump’s culture is already very different from your ‘average’ politician in the United States, it is light-years away from ours,” she added.

Kaku, the Japanese translator, said she worried that with Trump continuing to tweet with his current frequency and lack of filter, there will be an increase in “amateur translation” across social media outlets.

The character limits and immense speed in which tweets are posted make it difficult to circulate accurate translations of Trump’s tweets. “I’ve actually seen things explode within hours,” Kaku said.

In the past, Kaku said, American presidents appeared wary of speech that is too colorful or provocative, with an awareness that it must be heard — and understood — by audiences around the world.

“I’m not sure if this one will understand that,” Kaku said. “I don’t think he cares.”

Emily Rauhala in China contributed to this report.

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