

TRUMPSPEAK



Bérengère Viennot



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Translated by
Susan Pickford



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For Bonnie & Joshua

*It is a sad thing when men have neither enough
intelligence to speak well nor enough sense to
hold their tongues.*

—Jean de La Bruyère

I know the best words.

—Donald J. Trump

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Preface

When I wrote this book, Donald Trump was eighteen months into his presidency, and the whole world seemed to be struggling to find the words to describe the Trump phenomenon. Every time he opened his mouth, politicians, journalists, and amateur Trump-watchers gawped — or shook with outrage — at the apparently thoughtless language of the oddity in the Oval Office, an aberration among presidents who cared little for grand speeches and politically expedient prevarication and whose interviews and speeches seemed curiously underprepared.

The forty-fifth president of the United States has been the cause of much ink spillage, virtual or otherwise, on social media, in the press, and in print. Over the past four years, over 1,200 books have been written on him and his administration, some by well-known figures such as Michael Wolff, Bob Woodward, and James Comey, others by less familiar names — ex-Trumpites disappointed in, and often fired by, the man himself.¹ Then there are books by his admirers in praise of his leadership, and most recently, the tell-all, tear-him-down exposé by his niece Mary.

A few weeks out from the election that will either see Trump keep the reins for another four years or leave office, the broad lines of the argument I made back in the summer of 2018 have grown even clearer. While most analysts focused, logically enough, on his politics, I drew on my experience in journalism and my work as a translator to explore Trump's use of language. It quickly became clear to me that beneath the public persona of the straight-talking, straight-shooting big guy, Donald Trump, shored up by his

1. See Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter, "Trump Books Keep Coming, and Readers Can't Stop Buying," *The New York Times* (Aug. 31, 2020).

close associates and family, was beginning to build a fortress for the faithful, its foundations underpinned by a vision of America built on violence and hatred.

Trumpspeak, his most effective weapon, also turned out to be one of the most under-analyzed from the outset. Analysts and opponents had so much fun pointing and laughing at his clumsy use of language that they were too quick to conclude that he was just an amateur, a chaotic reality TV huckster with no vision or plan for the future of his country. He didn't seem credible, so they gave him little credence.

But words bear witness to the realities we all bear deep within us, and the reality Trump's words have long pointed to is horrifying. It is a profoundly painful experience to take our fingers out of our ears and listen to words that claim there are "very fine people" on both sides (neo-Nazis and anti-racism protesters); words that demand the death penalty and walls to divide people; words that brutally crush social conflicts stirred by racism; words that refuse to condemn killers and seek to shift the responsibility for a global pandemic onto a country and its people rather than face up to the truth of a public health & social catastrophe on American soil.

Because Trump never bothered to wrap his speeches up in pretty words and pat political catchphrases, we never took him seriously. And while half the world mocked his ignorance and his constant digressions and took amused, superior offense at his ostentatious displays of admiration for the worst tyrants of the age, he was busy applying the old adage "divide and rule" and digging an ever deeper chasm between two Americas, without the slightest suggestion of how it might be filled in again. His vulgar, aggressive outbursts, which early in his presidency brought out in us incredulous laughter, have since revealed the sheer force of personality of a man who has truly grasped that if the country were to come together again, it would be in opposition to him.

Trumpspeak is the language that began building an alt-reality straight after the inauguration and that, right down to the wire on his re-election campaign, is working to foster denial in an entire segment of the population, desperate to believe in his version of the American Dream. Trumpspeak is the language that lets his supporters at the Republican convention string together lie after lie to feed to those ready to settle for a black-and-white world where Trump stakes his claim to be the ultimate righter of wrongs, the fireman on call to put out a blaze he set alight himself. It is the language used in self-justification by all the Americans at the end of their tether who resort to violence, their consciences stilled by the moral inertia of the man who supposedly embodies the unity of their great nation.

Four years into his time in office, we can now see that Trumpspeak was the window dressing that let Trump and his clique nudge the entire apparatus of state ever further right; a smokescreen to confuse those who refused to see him as in any way credible. Deliberately or otherwise, it placed a grotesque facade at the forefront of American political life, with the upshot that Americans as a whole, and Democrats in particular, refused to take him seriously. In fact, so busy were we all ridiculing a man who can barely read, who is staggeringly ignorant, and seems not to know how to behave in public that we all dropped our guard. We should have mistrusted a language that has proved to be a grave threat for American democracy and for the wider Western world that has always looked to the United States for inspiration. We should have mistrusted Trumpspeak.

Hangover

For the millions of Americans who, prior to November 2016, never believed for a second that a narcissistic, sexist, racist, ignorant billionaire could reach the highest office in the land after George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, it's been the longest hangover in history.

It was a violently unexpected blow for many people across the United States and round the world. I'm a press translator, and on November 8, 2016, I was ready to stay up late in case any last-minute pre-election translations landed in my inbox before the results were expected early the next morning. Though some misgivings did sneak in during the weeks leading up to D-Day, I was quietly confident: a Trump victory was unthinkable. Not just because he wasn't up to the job or because personally I didn't want him, not just because I really, really liked the idea of the first female POTUS straight after a Black president, but simply because the concept was totally, absolutely, unarguably ridiculous.

By the time I went to bed at two that morning, two states had posted their initial results: Kentucky had voted for Donald Trump by 72.7 %, Indiana by 69.3%. OK, I thought to myself, Indiana has long been staunchly Republican and Kentucky has been leaning to the right since the early 2000s. It'll be a close-run thing, but Hillary will pull it out of the bag. There can only be one winner in this fight. Night, all.

I woke up to the bitter taste of defeat.

For me as a translator, Trump's election was a seismic shift. On a personal level, because I'm no fan of the man himself (and I find it even harder to hide my dislike, as you will see), and because I'm interested enough in international politics to have some inkling of what a potential disaster his rise to power was. And on a professional level, too, because the election forced

a sudden, violent change in my working practices, pushing me out of the comfort zone I'd been cozily ensconced in since Barack Obama came to power in November 2008, with no sweeteners to make up for it. For, like this strange presidency from the world of reality TV, utter ostentation, and overblown ego, Trumpspeak — the raw material I work with — turned out to belong to a whole new realm that was both the cause and effect of the advent of a new America.

Daring to Translate Trump

My translation career brings me into contact with the entire spectrum of international current affairs, and depending on the commissions my clients give me, I have translated all sorts of texts about the various political upheavals that have shaken the planet since the turn of the millennium. The work is as fascinating as it is poorly paid, putting me in the category of people whose career is their calling in life. Practically an artist. The people who love what they do so much that they put up with the invisibility and social and financial disregard that comes with the territory.

The translator (usually a woman — there *are* some male translators out there, I know, but hey, they can write their own books) is invisible by nature. Her task is to transpose a message from language (say, English) into another (say, French). And let me stop a moment and offer up a silent word of thanks for all the translators who will have to translate this book into Uzbek, Serbo-Croat, and Nahuatl. I know you're out there, even if no one else does.

Contrary to the received opinions that all my colleagues run up against throughout their careers, translation isn't just a matter of translating words, and it's not something that just anyone can do. It takes more than speaking two languages, or having a good dictionary, or being on first-name terms with the son of the British Council cleaning lady.

Translation is about transmitting a *message* from one language to another. That takes several steps, none of which can be skipped. First of all, you have to understand the source text. Seems obvious? Well, there's more to it than meets the eye. Understanding a text or a speech means more than just knowing each of the individual words. A text is far more than the sum of its semantic parts. (Actually, the toaster that hammers on the alluring clam will not diminish the

bones of my aunt's bicycle. You know all the words in this sentence, yet its meaning escapes you. Don't worry, me too. Words, words, words....)

For a text to exist, it must above all have a meaning, a referent, a message to transmit. Otherwise it's just a list of words — which can perfectly well be translated, of course, but whose semantic interest is open to question (with a special dispensation for the poems of Jacques Prévert). Translating lists might be useful in the field of technology, to describe the parts of a machine or draw up an inventory. In political translation, which is what we're talking about here, the aim is to recreate a coherent human discourse bearing a message destined for transmission.

Another prerequisite for translating a text or speech is being thoroughly familiar with the author's language, culture, and past experience — in short, knowing who the speaker is and having as much background on him as you can. Why? Because of a concept that has taken on a mystical dimension in the translation community, without which we are nothing: *context*. Just as an individual is influenced and shaped by their surroundings, words, sentences, entire speeches are meaningful only in context. Because the same sentence will mean something quite different when spoken by an American billionaire having achieved the highest office or, say, a gym coach or a physiotherapist.

Translation is the art of recreating the intellectual and affective sensations felt by readers of the source text in your own language (good translators always work into their mother tongue). The same word doesn't always reflect the same realities in different languages, even when it seems wholly basic and unambiguous. For instance, say "fromage" (cheese) to a Frenchman and he'll conjure up the image of a camembert (or maybe a comté, OK). The concept will take on an everyday familiarity, deeply anchored in French history. Now say "cheese" to an American, and he'll picture an

industrial, cellophane-wrapped foodstuff that triggers a whole new range of sensations and images (and as for the smell, well, let's not even go there). The same goes for pomodoro / tomato, Italy vs. England, say, or for things that aren't food. "Université," a word that is easy to translate, would be "university" in Britain or "college" in the States, covering very different realities on the ground. In most cases, there is a way to come up with an equivalent meaning that reaches beyond the form and appearance of words. This work, reformulating words, aims to recreate the message as faithfully as possible, taking into account all of the aspects I've just been talking about. *That's* what a translator does.

Let's look at an example. July 14, 2017. Trump is on a brief visit to Paris for Bastille Day, the French national holiday, and is introduced to the French First Lady, Brigitte Macron. He exclaims, "You're in such good shape!" Then he turns to the French president and repeats, "She's in such good physical shape!" Then he turns back to Mme Macron once more and concludes with a triumphant "Beautiful!"

Many French media outlets translated "You're in such good shape" as "Vous êtes en super forme!" (You're in great condition!). And, word for word, that is more or less right. And that might be the proper translation if the individual saying those words was another person in another context: a physiotherapist to his patient, a gym coach admiring his new client, a man to his wife's mother — there's no shortage of possibilities.

In this precise instance, however, "You're in such good shape" cannot be translated as "Vous êtes en super forme." Because if you take into consideration the context, the moment, and the speaker's personality, i.e. the fact that this is an openly sexist man who boasts of grabbing women by the pussy and despises them to the point of hinting that a hostile journalist is on her period, a man capable of denigrating a rival candidate

for the Republican nomination because he finds her unattractive,¹ and who refused to get his wife pregnant unless she promised to get her body back afterwards — in short, when you are familiar with the man himself, macho to the core, you have to take it into account and a literal translation becomes impossible.

Another key parameter: who is the POTUS talking to? He makes no bones about his preference for beautiful young women, to the point that he has even said that if Ivanka Trump weren't his daughter he'd date her himself. He's one of those men who think only young women can be beautiful. Past a certain age, she goes beyond her sell-by date, becomes invisible, and is no longer labeled "desirable."

Mme Macron was well into her sixties when she drew such fulsome praise from Trump. An old lady who still looks like a woman, wow, did you ever! That must have rocked the POTUS's mind (and yet all the signs are that this is not a man who readily questions his own certainties).

So, when you take into account both the speaker and what he is speaking about, you can only translate "You're in such good shape" as something like "Qu'est-ce que vous êtes bien conservée!" (You're so well preserved!) or "Mais vous êtes encore pas mal du tout!" (You're not bad looking at all for your age!) Shocking as it may seem, that is the only way to be faithful both to the explicit message and to the implicit content packed into what might have been a gushing compliment in his eyes, but which was in fact a deeply boorish and vulgar backhander.

So you need a thoroughgoing knowledge of the context to produce a good translation in general, and

1. "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?" he said of Carly Fiorina, who was then in the running for the Republican ticket. Paul Solotaroff, "Trump Seriously: On the Trail With the GOP's Tough Guy," *Rolling Stone* (September 9, 2015).

a good translation of Trump in particular. But that's not all. You also have to *dare* translate him. Which is not always easy for people who find themselves having to translate him when it's not their job (like journalists, say), who may be perfectly capable of recreating simple declarations, texts, and extracts in their own language, but often fall short when the difficulty kicks up a gear, as is the case here. Again, the difficulty is not in the vocabulary or the syntax, but in translation's requirement for what is known in the jargon as "deverbalization," a way of disembodiment of the message so that it can be given a new form in a new language and a new cultural setting.²

Another example of the same problem: in one of those xenophobic outbursts that have become his specialty, Trump explained at an Oval Office briefing that he was *totally over* immigrants from "shithole countries." By which he meant various African nations, Haiti, and El Salvador. "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" he commented, adding that he would prefer the United States to welcome immigrants from countries like Norway.

While understanding the *meaning* of the comment was no problem for anyone, translations for "shithole" in the French media varied considerably. The January 12, 2018 edition of the daily newspaper *Libération* chose the expression "trou à rats," or "rat hole," for instance.³ That seems a little weak compared to "pays de merde" (shitty countries) in *Le Monde*, "pays de chiotte" (countries down the crapper) in the Greek press (as reported by the French news agency AFP), and variations on a

2. I should point out that I am referring here to press & current affairs translation. There are a host of specialist fields in translation and the rules for translating news and political speeches do not necessarily hold true for other fields like technical, literary, or legal translation.
3. "Donald Trump: 'Pourquoi est-ce que toutes les personnes issues de trous à rat viennent ici?'" *Libération* (January 12, 2018).

theme of “paises de mierda” in the Spanish press. Daring to translate Trump is not as simple as the poverty & occasional vulgarity of his vocabulary might suggest.

For translators accustomed to translating the fluid, syntactically irreproachable speeches of his predecessor, Trumpspeak immediately proved to be dangerous territory. And this is deeply paradoxical, because when you read or listen to Trump, even if English is not your strong point, you feel like you understand everything. The vocabulary is ultra-basic, the sentences are short, even choppy, and the syntax..., how can I describe that? Well, it varies from day to day. Let’s just say that in a traditional setting, such as a campaign speech or an interview, Trump’s syntax alternates between extreme simplicity and total absurdity.

*

I’m not saying that there is only one way of translating a text, declaration, or political speech. There are many ways of saying the same thing and staying close to the original. But to create the same effect, it’s important to take the context & the register of the language into account and stick to the rules for that kind of discourse. This is not a particular problem once you’ve been translating for a few years and have got into the habit.

When Trump first appeared on the international political landscape, the professionals responsible for translating him needed a moment to adjust. In line with his claim to be anti-system, he broke with all the previous political codes: with his election, America stepped into a whole new world in terms of society, morals, and communication. My own little niche of translation was likewise forced to adapt and find a new space to work in.

A Killer Interview

Like butchers and bakers (“It’s slightly over, is that OK?”), teachers (“You’ve let me down, you’ve let yourself down, you’ve let the whole school down”), and actors accepting awards (“I love you mom”), in Western society, politicians give speeches that follow certain codes, or even clichés, in both form & content. They obey unspoken criteria, within the parameters of their own personality and political label.

What all politicians really want most of all is to be *heard*: as an instrument of persuasion, the form of their speeches is at least as important as the content. In the run-up to an election, they try to consolidate their party base and sway as many swing voters as they can. The idea being to create the best impression possible, they have to be polite and respect social mores — say hello to the lady, don’t tell grandpa he has hyena breath, don’t point and laugh at the poor and needy in public. For a politician, that translates into an unruffled, polite attitude and a similarly inoffensive register of speech. Being a good public speaker is crucial in creating a credible, professional image, though it can be a good idea to sometimes let the mask deliberately slip with a cleverly placed joke intended to make the speaker seem human.

When I was at translation school, one of the professors told us an anecdote to show us how important the interpreter’s role is and why we must adapt to the register of the source language. In the 1980s, Georges Marchais, the general secretary of the French Communist Party, regularly traveled to the USSR to give speeches. Since he spoke no Russian, he was given an interpreter. The man spoke such polished, elegant Russian that Marchais earned a reputation as an excellent public speaker. Which was very, very far removed from reality and the picture anyone back in France got from his French.

I never could find out if the anecdote was true, but it left such an impression on me that it came back to me twenty years later, when I found myself having to translate Trump's speeches. Because the register the translator chooses for a speech already points to its overall content.

There are also tacit norms in terms of content, obeyed by most politicians. For instance, it is customary for newly elected American presidents to acknowledge their predecessor's merits, however briefly, during their investiture in Washington: "I thank President Bush for his service to our nation" (Obama, 2009), "I thank President Clinton for his service to our nation. And I thank Vice President Gore for a contest conducted with spirit and ended with grace" (George W. Bush, 2000), "On behalf of our nation, I salute my predecessor, President Bush, for his half-century of service to America" (Bill Clinton, 1993). No need to go back as far as John Adams to grasp that it is customary for the new president to thank his predecessor for his service to the nation before getting on with the important stuff. Trump didn't bother. He merely thanked Obama for his "gracious aid throughout this transition" — in other words, he thanked him on a personal level, despite refusing to read or even receive daily intelligence briefings throughout the transition period. Obama did warn him he would be "flying blind" if he didn't look at them. "We are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent." And for the eight years of hard work before that, well, you can forget it. The same speech went even further, criticizing "a small group in our nation's Capital [which] has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost [...]. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs." What was that you said about the need for a conciliatory tone in the early days?

Trump nailed his colors to the mast from the outset. He would not bow to the rituals of the presidency.

Trump burst his way into well-mannered political discourse like an elephant in a china shop. Translators soon began tearing their hair out with his first speeches: on the level of both individual sentences and entire speeches, his language often seemed disjointed, sometimes even meaningless. It felt as if he were beginning a speech in his head and only began speaking half-way through the thought process. Which gave anyone listening (or translating) the impression of someone tossing words and ideas around in the air with no guiding thread. When you take an individual semantic unit or small group of words, some segments seem to mean something, but the general idea of the sentence is hard to grasp. The only recurrent element that Trump's audiences are bound to encounter, whatever the context, whatever the occasion, is ... Trump himself.

From a linguistic point of view, the first major shock came in late November 2016, when Trump granted the *New York Times* an interview, despite their turbulent relationship. This was the first official post-election interview, a few weeks before the inauguration. Naturally, it was hotly anticipated; Americans were now finally going to see and hear not Trump the presidential candidate, but Trump the president-elect, newly cloaked in the dignity of the highest office in the land. He would no longer need to be hostile or persuasive: the battle was won and the time had at last come to tackle the important questions.

Trump opened the interview by talking about his victory, the number of rallies he had attended daily, and the "very good" quality of the people he was about to appoint ("the quality of the people is very good," a bit like a pound of potatoes). He boasted about the rally attendance figures ("we had great numbers") and explained that he had never been a fan of the electoral college but now he was, for two reasons: "What it does do is it gets you out to see states that you'll never see

otherwise.” The second reason never came up (maybe because without the electoral college, he would have suffered a crushing defeat?). He added that he wished newspapers like the *New York Times* would be nicer to him (“I have great respect for *The Times*, and I’d like to turn it around. I think it would make the job I am doing much easier,” which showed his very *unique* understanding of the role of the media and hinted at their future relationship). He then began taking questions from the journalists. And that was a step into a brand new linguistic dimension.

Between two Trump monologues on how much “the people” love him and the vast crowds at his rallies, Carolyn Ryan asked if his supporters would be disappointed if he didn’t seek to hold Hillary Clinton to account. He said no, it was time to overcome “divisiveness” and “go in a different direction.” And then he seemed to trip a fuse:

Because our country’s really in bad, big trouble. We have a lot of trouble. A lot of problems. And one of the big problems, I talk about, divisiveness. I think that a lot of people will appreciate ... I’m not doing it for that reason. I’m doing it because it’s time to go in a different direction. There was a lot of pain, and I think that the people that supported me with such enthusiasm, where they will show up at 1 in the morning to hear a speech.

It was actually Election Day, they showed up at, so that was essentially Election Day. Yeah, I think they’d understand very completely.⁴

Each individual segment of this quote is understandable. Yet taken as a whole and putting its clumsy syntax to one side for now, it is ... somewhat unclear, let’s

4. “Donald Trump’s *New York Times* Interview: Full Transcript,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 23, 2016).

just say. If you use a traditional (I'm tempted to say "normal") translation technique to try and transmit the message in this quote, your brain will end up in a big knot. As is customary when a text is a bit too abstruse for its intended audience, the translator might be tempted to "contextualize" the translation by openly expanding on certain elements to make them simpler to read or discreetly developing an idea already present without altering or adding to the original message.

In this case, there can be no question of straightening things out to make the sentence easier to understand. It's not that it would be impossible to do so, because if you take a close look at the text you can more or less trace back the thread of the speaker's thoughts and understand what disjointed point he is trying to make; but smoothing out the contents would be so much work that you would end up with a declaration very different from the original. With Trump, the choppy format and apparently wild trains of thought are so much part of who he is that you find yourself forced to literally stick to the format of the original, or your translation will be unfaithful. Translators are used to dropping accidental repetitions and silently correcting occasionally errant syntax without changing the tenor of the message. But in Trump's case, improvements to syntax and form would be such a vast undertaking that it would not be translation, but a complete rewrite. The manner of speaking is just as important as the content of the message (if indeed there is a message in there), since it also reflects his character as a man and his thinking as a public speaker: so, such exaggeratedly clumsy speech forces the translator to do a good job translating someone who speaks badly, and therefore to write an awkward-reading translation. In truth, a translator who smoothed out Trump's syntax would miss the mark.

When you have spent the past twenty years of your career honing your language & thought to write clear translations, however demanding the speech,

when you teach your translation students how to separate the wheat of style from the chaff and constantly require them to grasp the tiniest nuance of their mother tongue, that goes against the grain. Always stick to the message, never betray the author's thinking, and write a text that reads perfectly smoothly, a bit like Boileau's dictum: "What we conceive, with ease we can express."

And then, bang, in stomps Trump, wipes the slate clean, and forces us to revise our techniques for translating political speeches. It's not that the requirement for accuracy is any less, but rather that in his case, accuracy must be applied to the mediocrity of his style.

The *New York Times* interview was a fairly representative foretaste of Trump's later speeches and remarks. Choppy syntax, extremely basic vocabulary, and most noticeably the constant repetition of the same words — no fewer than 41 uses of "great," which seems to be Trump's favorite word, 25 "wins," seven uses of "tremendous," and the list goes on. As if Trump's mind were stuck in a loop, a closed circuit, on the scale of his vocabulary and hence his thought.

Not only does he repeat himself, but his vocabulary also goes round in circles in a restricted lexical field overflowing with superlatives. The most unsettling thing about this is that even if the words themselves are extremely basic, some of the first ones you learn to get by in English, they aren't always the easiest to translate. In fact, the most precise, scholarly, specialist words are less semantically ambiguous than words whose meanings are woolly or even empty.

Trump's unconventional approach to international relations has also shaken the strictly policed parameters of political communication, as for instance when he discussed Russia and ISIS in the same interview: "wouldn't it be nice if we actually got along with Russia, wouldn't it be nice if we went after ISIS together, which is, by the way, aside from being dangerous, it's very expensive, and ISIS shouldn't have been even al-

lowed to form, and the people will stand up and give me a massive hand.”⁵ Or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “I’ve had a lot of, actually, great Israeli business people tell me, you can’t do that, it’s impossible. I disagree, I think you can make peace. I think people are tired now of being shot, killed.”⁶ Such infantile black-and-white thinking is at once a far cry from complex geo-political debate and light years away from the formulaic political blather that journalists (and translators) are accustomed to. Trump’s unique relationship with the press has ushered in a new era for communication, where he alone holds the reins and there is no question of him molding the message to his audience and their expectations. Does he make no effort with his speech because he doesn’t *want* to (he’s the president! He can do whatever he likes!) or because he *can’t*? Is he even aware that he falls below the average verbal skills of an educated adult, and especially of an American president? Is Trump alone in failing to grasp the change he himself embodies?

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

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SOME FORTHCOMING TITLES

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