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'WE WILL BURY YOU'

How Mistranslation Heightened Cold War Tensions

by Dr. Stuart J. Birkby

AS I write this article for GALAXY, the big international news currently being reported on my TV is the Russian takeover of the Ukraine's Crimea region. Political and military leaders in Europe and America are wondering out loud if we are about to see a repeat of the 20th century Cold War when Russia, then part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and the United States (US) vied for world supremacy through global influence on developing nation-states. Occasionally, the Cold War would spark a hot war as it did for the US in Korea (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1956-1975) and for the USSR against the Afghani Mujahidin (1979-1989).

During geopolitically tense times, translation of communications between the languages of nation-state opponents becomes critical. I note the careful language of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who keeps serious international opposition to his Crimean takeover at bay while at the same time seemingly preparing to solidify the Russian grip on the Ukraine. Yet miscommunication between Russian and, specifically, American leaders has occurred.

For example, at the beginning of his first term as US president, Barack Obama sent his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva to signal a new approach to Russo-American relations. Washington designated this event a “reset,” and Clinton brought a toy button to show Lavrov symbolically that there would be a change from the policies of the previous American administration under George W. Bush. Unfortunately, the Russian word on the button, “peregruzka,” did not mean “reset” but instead meant “overcharged,” as Lavrov politely pointed out to Clinton on international television (Foxnews.com, 2009).

This error caused only embarrassment for Clinton and the American State Department. But another example of mistranslation during the Cold War in the 1950s heightened suspicions by the US that the USSR meant to destroy America and conquer the world.

A Threatening Cold War Prediction

During a November 1956 reception for Poland’s Communist leader, Władysław Gomułka, at the Polish Embassy in Moscow, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev reportedly threatened Western diplomats by stating, in Russian, “We will bury you.” (His expanded tirade is translated into English and included at the end of this article.) But what did Khrushchev actually mean? Was this claim part of a nationalistic rant? Did Americans, predominantly monolingual

and failing to understand the social milieu of Cold War Russia, misunderstand Khrushchev's message?

The Soviet leader was regarded by his political enemies as a bumpkin and a boor from the Ukraine. Khrushchev was not polite, and he frequently made intemperate comments. His daughter admits "he was known for strong language, interrupting speakers, banging his fists on the table in protest, pounding his feet, even whistling" (Khrushcheva, 2000). He often shouted down speakers with insults at diplomatic conferences. Khrushcheva describes her father's actions as his "manner, which suited his goal . . . to be different from the hypocrites of the West, with their appropriate words but calculated deeds."

In 1959, while visiting an American exhibition of a modern kitchen in Moscow with US Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, Khrushchev responded to a stern Nixon, who at one point wagged his finger in Khrushchev's face, with a Russian phrase translated to English as "Go f**k my grandmother" (Mann, 2002). In 1960, while at the United Nations, Khrushchev took off his shoe and pounded it on the table during a speech being given by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. (Some accounts state erroneously that Khrushchev first uttered, "We will bury you," at this time.)

The English translation, as initially understood by most Americans, was taken out of context ideologically and culturally. Khrushchev's phrase was part of an expanded Russian statement accurately rendered as "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will dig you in" (*Time*, 1956). Mackenzie and Weisbrot (2008) believe such a mistranslation was likely because Khrushchev often bragged that Soviet missiles could destroy France, England, and the US. The American media subsequently misinterpreted his words as a threat to annihilate the US with nuclear bombs. The phrase, in English, was often repeated by Americans trying to prove that a "missile gap" existed between the two countries because the USSR purportedly had a bigger weapons arsenal than the US. Senator John F. Kennedy (D-MA) referred to this missile gap during his campaign for the presidency in 1960. (Upon becoming president, he was told the gap was a fiction and had been based on exaggerated data from the previous president's Science Advisory Committee and the US Air Force.) In addition, four years later, the presidential campaign of incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson included a television advertisement repeating Khrushchev's statement along with a video of Khrushchev (not making the statement at the time), followed by a mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb, to imply that the opposing candidate, Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), was an extremist and would lead America to destruction.

Khrushchev said, “We will bury you,” after many rounds of vodka, but it was not a threat of war spoken under the influence of alcohol. It should have been correctly translated and recognized as an invitation to peaceful competition. “Khrushchev was alluding to the march of history,” Mackenzie and Weisbrot (2008) write, “which, as a good Bolshevik, he trusted would vindicate communism and leave capitalism a lifeless relic.”

Melby (1995) believes Khrushchev’s remark reflects the Marxist notion that communism is historically inevitable. Therefore, if “time is on the side of communism,” which would have been a more accurate translation of the remark, there would be no need for the USSR to go to war. Communism would outlast capitalism. Thirty-four years later, Lewis (1990) explains that Khrushchev was saying that the Soviet system was superior and would produce a standard of living and a “social satisfaction” ahead of the West.

A closer analysis shows that “we” did not mean Khrushchev and other Kremlin leaders nor did “bury” mean the USSR would kill all Americans. Krauss and Morsella (2006) believe “we will bury you” in Russian can be rendered in English as “we will be present at your burial.” Therefore, Khrushchev was using a metaphor to explain that the communist system (the “we”) would witness the collapse of capitalism, and as supporters of the system that survived, the communists would give a *post mortem* farewell to capitalism.

Khrushchev, in a 1961 speech he gave at the Institute for Marxist-Leninism in Moscow, probably gave the best explanation of the phrase he uttered. Communism, he said, had “greatly exceeded the boldest and most optimistic predictions and expectations,” and no force in the world could stop it. He warned of a nuclear holocaust being initiated by the US. Then he stated that the USSR should follow a path of “peaceful coexistence,” which he described as an “intense, economic, political and ideological struggle between the proletariat and the aggressive forces of imperialism in the world arena” (Mackenzie and Weisbrot, 2008). Nevertheless, later that year, Khrushchev threatened President Kennedy with war if the US refused to end West German rule over West Berlin.

Khrushchev’s remark is colored by nationalism. No doubt, Khrushchev loved his country and was a disciple of Marx. He believed in the superiority of his Russian culture, especially since it was intertwined with the principles of Marxism. This feeling of love and superiority for country is shown by elevation of his rough, vernacular language to reverential status for use in diplomatic circles. Nationalism is also evident in the way Khrushchev frequently structured his diatribes as educational lessons to Western leaders. When Khrushchev uttered, “We will bury you,” he faced Western ambassadors and foreign officers like a teacher in front of a class,

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instructing his “students” about the greatness of Russia, of the USSR, of Marxism, and of communism.

An accurate translation would have preserved the nationalist ideology present in the original Russian. But because the American mistranslation implied the worst kind of threat to US nationalist ideology (that is, total extermination), Americans misinterpreted the phrase and saw Khrushchev as a hotheaded warmonger with his finger on the nuclear trigger. That the US response was one of shock and fear indicates that Americans interpreted the phrase as a grave threat to their way of life.

Conclusion

Martin Kay, a machine-translation developer, summed up the problem of language translation by stating: “In order to understand a sentence, your knowledge of linguistics is a relatively minor matter. Your knowledge of the world is incredibly important” (quoted in Silberman, 2000). This is a frequently overlooked aspect of translation.

It is probably fair to say that Khrushchev did not fully understand the motivations and points of view of Americans, nor did Americans (specifically, the American media) fully understand the motivations and points of view of Khrushchev. Translation must take into account the cultural background, the social circumstances, and

that what is said and what is intended to be communicated rely on what has been said before. This suggests the tall order that language translators should also be cultural, sociological, and semiotic experts to render accurate conversations of speech and writing from one language to another.

Furthermore, translators should not ask whether evidence of an ideology is present in a text because no text can be devoid of all ideologies. Therefore, translators should determine whether an ideology is obviously apparent or well concealed and whether it is to be preserved or modified.

In the specific case of Khrushchev's remark to diplomats that "we will bury you," the USSR leader's nationalist ideology---that his Russia, part of a union of Soviet socialist states, was superior and would survive competing ideologies---was changed through a mistranslation and considered a dangerous threat to America's survival. Khrushchev probably never expected his remark to be understood any other way but as a reflection of Marxism's historic inevitability. However, Americans translated literally what Khrushchev meant figuratively. The result was that Cold War tensions increased between the USSR and the US, which affected the relationship between the planet's two superpowers for the next three decades.

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Appendix

The following is a translated transcript, as printed in Time (November 26, 1956), of Soviet Nikita Khrushchev's tirade at a reception for Poland's Communist Party leader, Władysław Gomułka, at the Polish embassy in Moscow on November 18, 1956. Present were many Kremlin leaders and diplomats from the West, as well as diplomats from developing countries.

Khrushchev:

We are Bolsheviks! We stick firmly to the Lenin precept---don't be stubborn if you see you are wrong, but don't give in

that is only a police action aimed at restoring order! The Western powers are trying to denigrate [Egyptian President Gamal Abdel] Nasser, although Nasser is not a communist. Politically, he is closer to those who are waging war on him. And he has even put communists in jail.

Soviet President

Kliment Voroshilov: He had to.

Khrushchev[to

Voroshilov]: Don't try to help me.

[To Western diplomats]: Nasser is the hero of his nation, and our sympathies are on his side. We sent sharp letters to Britain, France, and Israel---well, Israel, that was just for form, because, as you know, Israel carries no weight in the world, and if it plays any role, it was just to start a fight.

[Singly and discreetly, Western diplomats begin to leave the room.]

If Israel hadn't felt the support of Britain, France, and others, the Arabs

would have been able to box her ears, and she would have remained at peace. I think the British and French will be wise enough to withdraw their forces, and then Egypt will emerge stronger than ever. You say we want war, but you have now got yourselves into a position I would call “idiotic.”

Mikoyan:

I would say “delicate.”

Khrushchev [ignoring

Mikoyan]:

Your troops from Germany, France, and Britain---I’m speaking of American troops---we will not stay one day in Poland, Hungary, and Rumania. But we, Mister Capitalists, we are beginning to understand your methods.

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