

Trump-Speak

When the U.S. President Swears, the Rest of the World Says WTF

BY KARIN ZEITVOGEL

In 2015, during the Republican primaries, Donald Trump used simple words and short phrases to help win the support of his GOP base. As we all know, he went on to win the Republican nomination and the presidency using speech that analysts have said was at the level of a fourth grader. It was, in fact, the lowest grade-level equivalent for speech of any candidate, Republican or Democrat, in the race, according to a 2015 analysis conducted by the Boston Globe newspaper.

"Simpler language resonates with a broader swath of voters in an era of 140-character Twitter tweets and 10-second television sound bites," wrote Matt Viser in the *Globe*, who noted that Hillary Clinton's speeches were on par with an eighth-grader. But Trump's talk beat out everyone in the race.

"He used fewer characters per word in his announcement speech, fewer syllables per word and his sentences were shorter than all other candidates," Viser wrote. "His vocabulary is filled with words like 'huge,' 'terrible,' 'beautiful.' He speaks in punchy bursts that lack nuance. It's all easily grasped, whether it's his campaign theme ('Make America Great Again'), words about his wealth ('I'm really rich'), or his disparagement of the Washington culture ('Politicians are all talk, no action')."

Two and a bit years later, in January 2018, the language used by Trump the president had progressed beyond his winning fourth-grade level. That was the month when Trump is reported by lawmakers who were with him in a meeting to have used the word "shithole" to describe African countries and Haiti during contentious talks over immigration reform.

According to psychological scientists Kristin Janschewitz of Marist College and Timothy Jay of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), who study swearing, among other things, we start to use curse words by age 2 and are swearing like grown-ups by ages 11 or 12, which is roughly the age of American fifth graders. So in that sense, Trump is showing progress. He's advanced from fourth to fifth grade.

The reaction from countries and an entire continent disparaged by the U.S. president was swift and had a common thread: Many saw the use of the word "shithole" as racist. Officials in Botswana said they viewed "the utterances by the current American President as highly irresponsible, reprehensible and racist." The Haitian government also called Trump's remarks racist, adding that "these insulting and reprehensible statements in no way reflect the virtues of wisdom, restraint and discernment that must be cultivated by any high political authority." And the African Group of Ambassadors to the United Nations labeled Trump's comment as "outrageous, racist and xenophobic," and called for a retraction and apology. The ambassadors' group also expressed concern "at the continuing and growing trend from the U.S. administration towards Africa and people of African descent to denigrate the continent and people of color."

Even Norway, whose people apparently Trump would like to have more of, wasn't flattered. "Thanks, but no thanks," tweeted one Norwegian politician. Christian Christensen, an American professor of journalism at Stockholm University in Sweden, was more explicit, tweeting: "Of course people from #Norway would love to move to a country where people are far more likely to be shot, live in poverty, get no health-care because they're poor, get no paid parental leave or



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President Donald Trump gives his 2018 State of the Union address at Congress. Trump's blunt, sometimes-profane remarks in public have rattled nerves, both at home and abroad.

“The pussy-grabbing comment, calling Mexicans rapists, saying all Haitians have AIDS and Nigerians live in huts. ‘Shithole’ encapsulates Trump’s way of seeing much of the rest of the world.”

TIMOTHY JAY

professor of psychology at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

subsidized daycare and see fewer women in political power. #Shithole.”

Meanwhile, back at the White House, Trump denied using the word but admitted he'd used tough language during the meeting. A couple of Republican Party lawmakers and agency heads developed amnesia after that meeting and said they couldn't remember if Trump had actually used the word. And aides to Trump were reportedly locked in a debate, not over whether Trump used the colorful description but which s-prefix he used: s---hole or s---house.

"He said shithole," said Jay, who has studied swearing for 40 years and even taught a class on the subject at MCLA. "We remember swear words when we hear them. We remember them better than we remember emotional words, like vomit."

Trump's track record of saying racist and demeaning things about entire groups of people adds to Jay's conviction that the president did indeed use a swear word to refer to a large part of the world. "The pussy-grabbing comment, calling Mexicans rapists, saying all Haitians have AIDS and Nigerians live in huts. 'Shithole' encapsulates Trump's way of seeing much of the rest of the world. It's a word you might use to describe a dive bar or a messy house, not one that the president of the U.S. should ever use to describe dozens of countries."

I SWEAR EVERYONE DOES IT

Many pundits say that while there is nothing wrong with using simple language to communicate with voters, oversimplification can obscure the nuance of complex issues and lead to a general dumbing-down of political debate.

But Trump's outspoken nature goes beyond basic vocabulary. Critics of Trump's vulgarity say it not only offends key U.S. partners such as Nigeria and even Norway (whose economic and security cooperation we need), but it also reveals a fundamental lack of understanding and empathy. They also worry it demeans the office he holds and sets a dangerous precedent by slowly chipping away at our civil discourse, at a time when the country is more bitterly divided than ever.

Trump's supporters say his blunt talk cuts through the stilted platitudes of diplomacy and speaks directly to everyday people frustrated by immigration, globalization and the Beltway elites who have ignored their plight. According to a 2016 article in *Time* by Melissa Mohr, author of "Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing," studies have shown that people who swear are more likely to be believed. "These psychologists had study participants read political blog posts with and without obscenities, and found that people had more favorable impressions of — and would be more likely

to vote for — the cursing candidates.”

In his defense, Trump might note that swearing is correlated with an extrovert personality, like his, and is a defining feature of a Type A personality, which is characterized by competitiveness, drive and perfectionism. It is, however, also characterized by hostility, impatience, difficulty expressing emotions and an unhealthy dependence on external rewards such as wealth, status or power, according to Psychology Today.

Inappropriate swearing has been associated with damage to the frontal lobe of the brain — sometimes referred to as our emotional control center — aphasia and Tourette’s disorder. “Brain activity in the frontal lobe acts as a brake on us saying something rash, like about grabbing women by the pussy or calling other countries shitholes,” said Jay. “You and I would stop and think of the consequences and significance attached to statements like those. I’m not a clinician but Trump doesn’t seem to do that.”

Of course, Trump is hardly the only high-ranking official to ever swear. Vice President Joe Biden was picked up by a nearby mic saying to President Barack Obama in March 2010 when the Affordable Care Act was signed into law, “This is a big fucking deal.” President George W. Bush was caught in another open-mic snafu referring to a reporter as a “major-league asshole.” In 2004, then-Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) explained in an interview with Rolling Stone why he voted to allow the U.S. to lead the invasion of Iraq a year earlier: “I voted for what I thought was best for the country,” he said. “Did I expect George Bush to fuck it up as badly as he did? I don’t think anybody did.”

Lyndon B. Johnson’s language was “salted



CREDIT: OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY D. MYLES CULLEN

President Trump walks with Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg on Jan. 10. After reportedly saying that he did not want immigrants from “shithole countries” such as Haiti and African nations, Trump said he would welcome more immigrants from Norway, a comment widely interpreted as racist.

with profanity,” according to Rolling Stone magazine. The Watergate tapes that brought down Richard Nixon gave us the phrase “expletive deleted” because they were so laced with curse words.

But those were all private, not public, moments. Trump has repeatedly used curse words in his public appearances and on Twitter. He

famously declared that he would bomb the shit out of ISIS. More recently, he tweeted that Moscow is “laughing their asses off” over the probe into possible collusion between Trump’s campaign and the Kremlin. And in a 2011 speech in Las Vegas, he blasted China by declaring, “Listen you motherf---ers, we’re going to tax you 25 percent!” — words that probably

didn’t endear him to Beijing’s leadership but resonated with many of his blue-collar fans.

FOREIGNERS HAVE FOUL MOUTHS, TOO

American politicians aren’t the only ones with foul mouths. President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines famously called President Obama the “son of a whore” and the U.S. ambassador to Manila a “gay son of a whore.” He also told the Catholic Church, “Don’t fuck with me,” and when the United Nations chastised him for extrajudicial killings in his war on drugs in the Philippines, Duterte said the U.N. shouldn’t issue “shitting” statements about his policies. Most recently, he warned female communist guerillas that soldiers will “shoot you in the vagina.”

Former French Prime Minister François Fillon, who was the frontrunner in last year’s race to be the presidential candidate for the center-right Les Républicains party until he was derailed by claims he gave his wife and kids very well-paid jobs that they didn’t actually do, spoke in a speech on the campaign trail of the passionate plea he heard from workers in every corner of France. “Laissez-nous travailler, laissez-nous réussir, qu’on nous fiche la paix, que l’Etat arrête de nous emmerder.”

“Emmerder” derives from the French word “merde” (the “s” word), but many swear words in one language don’t translate directly into another. So in translation, Fillon’s quote of what French workers told him over and over might be, “Let us work, let us succeed, leave us alone, let the government stop fucking us around.”

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Comedian Beppe Grillo, leader of Italy's Five-Star Movement, has made a splash on the political scene with his colorful “parolacce,” or swear words in Italian. His graphic pronunciations have apparently rubbed off on average Italians, according to a Feb. 15, 2017, article in *The New York Times* by Beppe Severgnini, which noted that, “We used to be surprised by the number of ‘F-words’ in American movies; now our own equivalent, ‘C-words’ — many of which refer to various parts of the human anatomy — are everywhere. Calling someone a ‘stronzo,’ Italian for ‘turd,’ is quite popular.”

In Britain, swearing comes across as a milder endeavor than in the U.S. Prime Minister Theresa May, at the start of campaigning for the snap election she called in 2017 (the one that didn't turn out too well for her), said European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker would find he is dealing with “a bloody difficult woman” in Brexit talks. Although many Americans would find that fairly tame, “bloody” is considered a swear word in Britain.

In the same campaign, actress Julie Hesmondhalgh — best known for starring in the soap opera “Corona-



PHOTO: PIXABAY / ETINOSA YVONNE

A Nigerian man is seen outside of a market. President Trump reportedly said that people from Nigeria would never “go back to their huts” if they came to the United States, infuriating many in the African nation where the U.S. has key security and economic interests.

tion Street” between 1998 and 2014 — described Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn as “a man who has dedicated his life to giving a toss about other people.” “Toss,” used in this context, does not mean flipping a coin. It's often considered a euphe-

mism for masturbation.

And in yet another incident, British Shadow First Secretary of State Emily Thornberry (where shadow refers to the opposition party) said on live television that Defense Secretary Michael Fallon was talking “bol-

locks” about something. To the British vernacular neophyte, this is not the cunning stunt it might appear to be. Newcastle University linguistics lecturer Damien Hall gave a very British explainer of what Thornberry meant. “Bollocks” originally meant

‘testicles’ (and was considered standard until the 17th century), but it's now used to mean ‘nonsense,’ among other things,” he noted in an article in *The Conversation*. “It was also ruled un-obscene by a U.K. court in 1977,” so Thornberry can say it all she wants. She was reportedly seen mouthing the word when former Prime Minister David Cameron was speaking in the House of Commons.

Politics is a deeply personal, rough-and-tumble sport, so it's little surprise that coarse language is part of the game. But even in sports, where trash-talking is the norm, there are certain rules players must respect and boundaries they should not cross. Trump has erased a lot of conventional lines and even gotten the mainstream media (us included) to utter profanities it once considered too taboo to repeat. Most Americans aren't shy about cursing in everyday life. But it remains to be seen if we accept unfiltered politicians cussing up a storm as part of our new national discourse. 

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