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2 February 2015

## The greatest mistranslations ever



President Obama meets with Mexican President Enrique Peña (Win McNamee/ Getty Images)

**After Google Translate’s latest update, BBC Culture finds history’s biggest language mistakes – including a US president stating ‘I desire the Poles carnally’.**

Google Translate’s latest update – turning the app into a real-time interpreter – has been heralded as bringing us closer to ‘a world where language is no longer a barrier’. Despite glitches, it offers a glimpse of a future in which there are no linguistic misunderstandings – especially ones that change the course of history. BBC Culture looks back at the greatest mistranslations of the past, with a 19th-Century astronomer finding signs of intelligent life on Mars and a US president expressing sexual desire for an entire nation.

### **Life on Mars**

When Italian astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli began mapping Mars in 1877, he inadvertently sparked an entire science-fiction oeuvre. The director of Milan’s Brera Observatory dubbed dark and light areas on the planet’s surface

'seas' and 'continents' – labelling what he thought were channels with the Italian word 'canali'. Unfortunately, his peers translated that as 'canals', launching a theory that they had been created by intelligent lifeforms on Mars.

Convinced that the canals were real, US astronomer Percival Lowell mapped hundreds of them between 1894 and 1895. Over the following two decades he published three books on Mars with illustrations showing what he thought were artificial structures built to carry water by a brilliant race of engineers. One writer influenced by Lowell's theories published his own book about intelligent Martians. In *The War of the Worlds*, which first appeared in serialised form in 1897, H G Wells described an invasion of Earth by deadly Martians and spawned a sci-fi subgenre. *A Princess of Mars*, a novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs published in 1911, also features a dying Martian civilisation, using Schiaparelli's names for features on the planet.

While the water-carrying artificial trenches were a product of language and a feverish imagination, astronomers now agree that there aren't any channels on the surface of Mars. According to [Nasa](#), "The network of crisscrossing lines covering the surface of Mars was only a product of the human tendency to see patterns, even when patterns do not exist. When looking at a faint group of dark smudges, the eye tends to connect them with straight lines."

### **Pole position**

Jimmy Carter knew how to get an audience to pay attention. In a speech given during the US President's 1977 visit to Poland, he appeared to express sexual desire for the then-Communist country. Or that's what his interpreter said, anyway. It turned out Carter had said he wanted to learn about the Polish people's 'desires for the future'.

Earning a place in history, his interpreter also turned "I left the United States this morning" into "I left the United States, never to return"; [according to Time magazine](#), even the innocent statement that Carter was happy to be in Poland became the claim that "he was happy to grasp at Poland's private parts".

Unsurprisingly, the President used a different interpreter when he gave a toast at a state banquet later in the same trip – but his woes didn't end there. After delivering his first line, Carter paused, to be met with silence. After another line, he was again followed by silence. The new interpreter, who couldn't understand

the President's English, had decided his best policy was to keep quiet. By the time Carter's trip ended, he had become the punchline for many a Polish joke.



Nikita Khrushchev, 1935 (Hulton Archive/ Getty Images)

### **Keep digging**

Google Translate might not have been able to prevent one error that turned down the temperature by several degrees during the Cold War. In 1956, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was interpreted as saying “We will bury you” to Western ambassadors at a reception at the Polish embassy in Moscow. The phrase was plastered across magazine covers and newspaper headlines, further cooling relations between the Soviet Union and the West.

Yet when set in context, Khrushchev's words were closer to meaning “Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will dig you in”. He was stating that Communism would outlast capitalism, which would destroy itself from within, referring to a passage in Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto that argued “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers.” While not the most calming phrase he could have uttered, it was not the sabre-rattling threat that inflamed anti-Communists and raised the spectre of a nuclear attack in the minds of Americans.

Khrushchev himself clarified his statement – although not for several years. “I once said ‘We will bury you’, and I got into trouble with it,” he said during a 1963 speech in Yugoslavia. “Of course we will not bury you with a shovel. Your own working class will bury you.””

### **Diplomatic immunity**

Mistranslations during negotiations have often proven contentious. Confusion over the French word ‘demander’, meaning ‘to ask’, inflamed talks between Paris and Washington in 1830. After a secretary translated a message sent to the White House that began “le gouvernement français demande” as “the French government demands”, the US President took issue with what he perceived as a set of demands. Once the error was corrected, negotiations continued.

Some authorities have been accused of exploiting differences in language for their own ends. The Treaty of Waitangi, a written agreement between the British Crown and the Māori people in New Zealand, was signed by 500 tribal chiefs in 1840. Yet conflicting emphases in the English and Māori versions have led to disputes, with a poster claiming ‘The Treaty is a fraud’ featuring in the Māori protest movement.



Zhou Enlai, 1950 (Hulton Archive/ Getty Images)

### **Taking the long view**

More of a misunderstanding than a mistranslation, one often-repeated phrase might have been reinforced by racial stereotypes. During Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai famously said it was ‘too early to tell’ when evaluating the effects of the French Revolution. He was praised for his sage words, seen as reflecting Chinese philosophy; yet he was actually referring to the May 1968 events in France.

According to retired US diplomat Charles W Freeman Jr – Nixon’s interpreter during the historic trip – the misconstrued comment was “one of those convenient misunderstandings that never gets corrected.” Freeman said: “I cannot explain the confusion about Zhou’s comment except in terms of the extent to which it conveniently bolstered a stereotype (as usual with all stereotypes, partly

perceptive) about Chinese statesmen as far-sighted individuals who think in longer terms than their Western counterparts.

“It was what people wanted to hear and believe, so it took hold.”

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