and that's it, like the Super Bowl parade… We had dinner at the Eiffel Tower, and the bottom of the Eiffel Tower looked like they could have never had a bigger celebration ever in the history of the Eiffel Tower. I mean, there were thousands and thousands of people, 'cause they heard we were having dinner.

Followed by this:

Well, Napoleon finished a little bit bad. But I asked that. So I asked the president, so what about Napoleon? He said: "No, no, no. What he did was incredible. He designed Paris" … The street grid, the way they work, you know, the spokes. He did so many things even beyond. And his one problem is he didn't go to Russia that night because he had extracurricular activities, and they froze to death. How many times has Russia been saved by the weather?… Same thing happened to Hitler. Not for that reason, though. Hitler wanted to consolidate. He was all set to walk in. But he wanted to consolidate, and it went and dropped to 35 degrees below zero, and that was the end of that army. But the Russians have great fighters in the cold. They use the cold to their advantage. I mean, they've won five wars where the armies that went against them froze to death… It's pretty amazing.

Then, without transition: "So, we're having a good time. The economy is doing great."

In early August, as tensions flared with North Korea over its nuclear program and missile tests, Trump said: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen…" North Korea responded by sending a missile for the first time directly over Japan.

Yeah, Trump clearly has the "best words."

And we're all having a great time. Amusez-vous bien!

–Edith Grossman, translator

I have the very strong yet untested impression that Trump tends to speak in monosyllables. Line after line of very short words, his "best words," like projectiles that he propels out of the pucker of his mouth in a percussive, menacing stream of sound, as if he were firing a machine-gun—a machine-gun loaded with monosyllables.

Why would he speak this way? It turns everything he says into pronouncements of hostility: a tough-guy pose that brooks no opposition and disguises the extreme privilege of his life, his position, his wealth, his "education."

—Edith Grossman

–Liora R. Halperin, professor, University of Washington in Seattle

The Pedant Class

In her 1995 book, *Verbal Hygiene*, Deborah Cameron writes of the widespread social practice of correcting other people's language practices,

pontificating about correct or incorrect usage, belittling others for their grammatical errors, and lamenting the corruption of the language from a supposed better or more perfect state in the past. Liberals who argue for tolerance in matters of racial, sexual, or national difference bemoan linguistic deviancy, often adopting distinctly conservative and elitist positions with respect to language. Why does language become the space in which social and political conflicts are played out? "Linguistic conventions," Cameron argues, "are quite possibly the last repository of unquestioned authority for educated people in secular society." Those with mastery of language see themselves as definitively better than those who lack it.

Trump clearly lacks mastery—despite his proclamation of having "the best words," he often has the most confusing words. The Merriam-Webster's dictionary has risen to internet stardom by expertly trolling Donald Trump and other members of the administration for using words and punctuation incorrectly, uttering absurd phrases, and giving alternative definitions to words to serve agendas of self-glorification, demonization, and obfuscation. Citing odd elocutions, blatantly incorrect usage, or incomprehensible language, critics see Trump's linguistic deviance as one key reflection of the incompetence of the administration and Trump himself. We see the linguistic flaws as both risible and terrifying. We mock, but we also fear his language for the lack of discipline, rigor, or thoughtfulness that it seemed to reveal.

Expertise, linguistic or otherwise, is not faring well under the Trump administration. Many of his cabinet picks lack even an undergraduate, let alone a graduate-level qualification in the policy-area they now oversee. Many of the universities and educational systems that would have provided these credentials have been losing public funding for decades and relying ever more on contingent labor, but are now being attacked for being bastions of narrow minded liberal professors and "safe spaces." Those with the linguistic knowhow and inclination to separate a noun from an adjective, a gerund from a participle, a sentence from a fragment—who are also probably people with higher education—feel like an embattled breed, and we know it. And yet we cope with Trump's opaque, rule-breaking language by believing that perhaps we are the real America, the America of founders and leaders who penned the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in high rhetorical style. Ours, we imagine, is a meritocratic form of prestige. It is precisely the merit we want our country to impart by investing in schools and universities. To defend language—and to mock its misuse—is (many think, or reflexively feel) to defend education, rigor, and discipline.

But, as is clear from Trump's election, one doesn't need oratory, or coherence as typically defined, to win anymore. Indeed, Trump won in part because his language, lacking the features of education, prestige, or knowledge, seemed authentic to wide swaths of voters. Communication, we are taught to believe, is effective to the extent that it is understood. But Trump's language

was understood not for its content, which is so often opaque, but for its undertones, its simplicity, its emotional core. These undertones are sometimes called dog whistles, implying that they emit a frequency of meaning that is inaudible to mainstream listeners but acutely audible to a certain set of mostly white, mostly rural or suburban masses. The metaphor is telling: the well-educated folk see themselves as full human beings in comparison to the animalistic crowd. The frequencies audible to these masses are not really language, they are sub-linguistic, and those who can understand the sublinguistic must be a little subhuman. These prejudices are crude. Many would deny them while others would simply justify them. But attitudes and discourse about language, in this case Trump's broken, contorted, opaque language, tell us something not only about Trump, but about those who critique him, their anxieties, fears, and concerns.

–Jacques Lezra, professor, University of California at Riverside

"Trumplatonism"

> I went to an Ivy League school. I'm very highly educated. I know words; I have the best words.
>
> Donald J. Trump, Dec. 30, 2015 (South Carolina)

> And Glaucon very ludicrously said, "Heaven save us, hyperbole can no further go."
> "The fault is yours," I said, "for compelling me to utter my thoughts about it."
>
> Plato, *Republic* 509c (Shorey)

"Better" words—that's a claim we could understand; perhaps today we could endorse generally the idea that it's better to have better words to hand than less-good ones (though we'd be hard-pressed to correlate an education, even or especially at an Ivy League school, with the "knowledge" or "having" of such better words). Some words are "better" than others for certain things, and "better" in some hands than in others at those or other things—they designate with greater precision; they persuade some people more readily or more people sooner than other words; they move us more; they serve better to recall words we've loved or feared to hear. "Better" reminds us of language's irreducible practicality: a word's meaning is its use; words perform. A president may inaugurate, may with a word and a signature scrap a bill and end a dream, declare war, victory, defeat. A leader may exhort, inspire, resign, condemn, and so on. Someone like Donald Trump may provoke, insult, demean, recruit, and do so comparatively better or worse than another. "Better" words are the stuff of politics and of policy. In the European imaginary, the public struggle over the "better" word makes the city, the *polis*, what it is. (The famous marketplace of ideas has a peculiar double sense—use and location meet. In the *agora* the words that express ideas are on display as if they were wares or goods. But the *agora* is also just where you or I, or Agathon and Alcibiades, might go to see which of our ideas better persuades more of our fellow citizens.)