

A Dog's Life

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Собаку съесть: to be an expert in something, to know something inside out

OK, kids, it's time for your weekly language pop quiz. Where does the expression “the dog days of summer” come from? No idea? No problem. Your friendly expression-explainer is here to help.

The expression comes from the Latin (*dies caniculares*) and refers to the star Sirius, called the Dog Star because it is the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major. When the Dog Star appears in the morning sky (July 3), it marks the start of the hottest period of the year — the dog days — which end on Aug. 11.

See? The heat wave is not being caused by a secret U.S. weapon, no matter what some Russian bloggers say.

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, these dog days got me thinking about dog expressions in Russian. The easiest ones to understand are comparative expressions formed with an

adjective and как собака (like a dog). Dogs were usually left outside to fend for themselves, hence the expressions голодный, как собака (ravenous; literally, “as hungry as a dog”) and замёрз, как собака (frozen stiff; literally, “as cold as a dog”). Hunting dogs gave us another comparison: Я пришла с работы усталая, как собака (I came home from work dog-tired). And guard dogs yet another: Весь день я был злой, как собака (All day I’ve been mad as a junkyard dog).

Some собака expressions come from English, like не буди спящую собаку (let sleeping dogs lie), or German, like вот где зарыта собака (so this is where the dog is buried). Etymologists propose various convoluted explanations for this puzzling expression. Whatever the origin, today it means finding the real reason for something: Aha! So that’s what this is really about!

A strange but commonly used expression is съесть собаку (literally, “to eat up a dog”), which is used to describe someone’s experience and expertise. Once again, etymologists have various explanations for the origin of this phrase. Some posit that eating dog meat (shudder) was hard to do (no kidding), and thus eating a whole dog was a great achievement (revolting). In any case, today speakers don’t “hear” the literal meaning. В издательском деле, я, можно сказать, собаку съел (I know publishing inside and out).

There are a couple of собака expressions in which the собака isn’t really a собака. Вешать собак на него (literally, “to hang dogs on him”) means to heap accusations on someone, to blame someone unfairly. After sports matches, coaches of the losing teams can be heard protesting: Хватит вешать на меня всех собак! (Stop making me the fall guy!) Here, however, собака refers to a thistle, which was apparently hung on enemies’ clothing as part of a magical spell.

Another expression, гонять собак (literally, “to chase dogs”) means to goof off or kill time. In this case, собака in northern Russia meant a stick used to whack a ball around. Over time, the image of hitting a ball with a stick became a synonym for doing nothing, although baseball players would probably disagree. In any case, you need to know this to make sense of a sentence like: Не мог же он, морской офицер, гонять собак по гарнизону (As a naval officer, he certainly couldn’t hang around the garrison doing nothing).

Now if I could get a major league baseball salary for doing nothing, I’d spend the dog days on a beach.

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