

Sharpening Your Knife and Tongue

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Заточить: to sharpen, imprison, customize

In the pre-dawn darkness, when I am woken up by the clanking of construction and swearing of workers under my window, I like to imagine that it's 100 years ago and I'm hearing the squeak of a wheel and the call of точильщик (knife-grinder): Ножи точить! (Sharpen your knives!)

This pathetic attempt at self-delusion is probably the result of my obsession with the word заточить (to sharpen) and its various derivations, which seem to have multiplied exponentially in form and meaning lately.

True, заточить sometimes means what I expect it to mean. Любой желающий прямо в спортивном магазине может заточить коньки (Anyone can sharpen his skates right in the sporting goods store). I'm also more or less used to an old-fashioned usage of the verb, which means to imprison someone. Царь заточил жену в монастырь (The tsar shut his wife away in a convent).

And it wasn't hard to figure out that заточка is a camp term for a handmade knife, what in English is called a shiv or shank knife. I could also understand a sentence like this, where the sharpening was more figurative: Вопрос заточен правильно (The question is sharply focused).

But then take the adjectival form of заточить, заточен (заточена, заточено). It is usually used with the preposition под to refer to something that is customized for someone or something. For example: Сайт был заточен под целевую аудиторию (The site was designed for a specific target audience). Sometimes you find this sense with the verb заточить: Для того, чтобы оно привлекло внимание кадровиков, вам нужно заточить под них своё резюме (In order to catch the attention of the managers in human resources, you have to customize your resume to suit them).

But customizing isn't always a good thing. When you creatively customize a request for bids, заточенность can mean bid-rigging: Заточенность муниципальных конкурсов под конкретного участника стала предметом обсуждения на заседании городской антикоррупционной комиссии (Rigging the city's bid requests in favor of a specific company was discussed by the city anti-corruption commission). Or it can mean serving someone's interests in an unfair way, as in this old headline about staff changes in Moscow: Московские силовики более не заточены под Лужкова (The Moscow siloviki are no longer Luzhkov's men). Or it can mean benefiting one group, as in this complaint: Мир заточен под мужчин! (It's a man's world!)

Sometimes people use the preposition на with заточено: Стоит внимательно изучить опыт Индии, где ИТ-образование занимает существенно меньше времени, но заточено на нужды индустрии (It's worth carefully studying the experience of India, where IT training is considerably shorter but is specifically designed to meet the needs of industry).

In other cases, заточенность means getting stuck on something. Заточенность некоторых журналистов на чёрном пиаре в отношении кинозвёзд не может не беспокоить (It's worrisome that some journalists get hung up on negative PR about movie stars). Or focusing on something to the detriment of everything else: Специфической для России является заточенность PR-менеджеров на решение частных задач и проблем (Typically in Russia, PR managers get hung up focusing on narrow tasks and problems).

Until all these usages get codified, I've got to agree with one blogger who wrote: Заточенность заточенности рознь (There's focusing, and then there's focusing). I hear you, man.

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