

Chernomyrdin's Linguistic Legacy

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Лучше водки хуже нет!: Better than vodka there's nothing worse!

Long before Russians snickered over the salty and folksy comments of Vladimir Putin, they laughed about the comical gaffes of Viktor Chernomyrdin. A language bungler extraordinaire, he had a knack for inadvertently mixing up expressions, making unintentional innuendoes and getting balled up in euphemisms that were more suggestive than he intended. But Chernomyrdin wasn't a comical figure. And among his malapropisms were a few real pearls that have become part of Russian speech.

As someone who does public speaking from time to time, I have to say I sympathize with some of Chernomyrdin's gaffes. You open your mouth to say one thing, and something else pops out. At least that's how I interpret phrases like this: Надо срочно ликвидировать жертвы катастрофы (We need to immediately liquidate the disaster victims). Or: Лучше водки хуже нет! (Better than vodka there's nothing worse!)

Besides, it can't have been easy for Chernomyrdin to defend the government's actions during

the 1990s. The government tried hard: Мы выполнили все пункты: от А до Б (We did all our tasks: from A to B). Chernomyrdin urged public officials to serve the people: Надо делать то, что нужно нашим людям, а не то, чем мы здесь занимаемся (We have to do what our people need, not what we're doing here). And he promised to respond to the people's requests: Все те вопросы, которые были поставлены, мы их все соберём в одно место (All the questions that have been posed — we'll gather them up and stick them somewhere). And he pledged to work hard: Мы продолжаем то, что мы уже много наделали (We're continuing to do what we've already made a mess out of). But he also was a realist: Не надо сразу требовать невозможного, чтобы все говорили и писали (You shouldn't demand the impossible right away — that everyone speaks and writes). Come on, people, cut the government some slack here!

Those were confusing times: Раньше полстраны работало, а пол не работало, а теперь ... всё наоборот (In the past, half the country worked and half didn't, and now it's the other way around). The government had to expect the unexpected: Сроду такого не было, и опять то же самое (From the very beginning nothing like this ever happened, and now it's the same thing all over again). And even their best efforts weren't good enough: Мы как вступать начнём, так обязательно на что-нибудь наступим (As soon as we start to take a step forward, we inevitably step on something).

But the former prime minister believed in his people: Переживём трудности. Мы не такие в России россияне, чтобы не пережить. И знаем, что и как надо делать. (We'll get through these difficult times. We aren't Russians in Russia for not being able to get through them. And we know what to do and how to do it.)

Sadly, despite everyone's best intentions: Хотели, как лучше, а получилось, как всегда (We wanted things to be better, but they turned out the way they always do). Ain't it the truth — not only for Russia, but for much of human endeavor everywhere in the world?

While Chernomyrdin tripped over his tongue, there was something endearingly human about his blunders. I miss that in politicians today.

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